

THE GREAT MONASTIC
ORDERS SERIES

THE BENEDICTINES

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THE LIFE OF SAINT BENEDICT

Sources

“**I** DO not know all his actions, but what little I relate of them I have from four of his disciples who have transmitted it to me: Constantinus, a very venerable man, who succeeded Benedict in the conduct of his monastery; Valentinian, who for many years was head of that of the Lateran; Simplicius, who was the third in order to administer his community; and finally Honoratus, who still to-day governs the monastery in which the man of God lived.”¹ Thus speaks the illustrious pontiff, St. Gregory the Great, in the beginning of the second book of his *Dialogues*, which he consecrates in its entirety to the life of St. Benedict.

This narrative of St. Gregory written, as one already feels from the first lines, with an exceptional tenderness is the only source of this life which we possess. The author's account of his memories is animated with affection on every page, and it is clear that it is presented as a work

¹ *Dialogues of St. Gregory the Great*, Book II, in the Prologue.

of interpretation rather than as a historical document. It is difficult not to receive here and there the impression of evangelical simplicity, and if it should seem hard to distinguish the historical from the legendary content in many passages, it must not be forgotten that, although he made no pretensions as a historian, St. Gregory wrote it in 593, that is to say fifty years after the death of St. Benedict, which came unexpectedly in 543; that his apologetic point of view did not obscure in his mind the need for sincerity; and finally, that we would do wrong to deny, as certain critics have done, the accuracy *in toto* of this narrative which, we repeat, remains our only source.

In a remarkable article in the *Revue Bénédictine* ² Dom Germain Morin has frankly defined his attitude in regard to this delicate question in a manner which should appeal to our good judgment. After having opposed the criticism of which I speak, he grants that "it is incontestable that the spirit of St. Gregory himself enters into those narratives which feature St. Benedict." ³ And why not note that at the time

² 1922. "Bulletin d'ancienne littérature chrétienne latine."

³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

of the great pontiff the mind accepted miracles without too much reluctance? Let us, therefore, adopt the eminent Benedictine scholar's opinion in his conclusion: "In fact, the real stumbling-blocks are the miraculous facts . . . I am far from pretending that all deserve the same credence. But if we should be obliged to reject all documents from the first centuries which contain marvels, we would sacrifice without pity a number of the most precious fragments of ecclesiastical history. . . . As to the nature of certain extraordinary events told by Gregory, whether or not they were miracles is a matter to leave to God. Gregory believed in them in good faith. . . . Moreover, to make an end to this main complaint against the *Dialogues*, long since formulated, I wish to recall with all respect, following the Maurists, that in the Gospels there are several facts which are at least as baffling." ⁴

After having made this reservation, it remains for us to return to our source in all simplicity and to place our reliance upon it in order to draw from it the breath of primitive freshness, and to stir up in ourselves the fervor of the pontiff when he retraced the life of the holy Patriarch.

⁴ Ibid., p. 39.

History

Benedict was born in 480 at Nursia, in the heart of Umbria, close to the hill which is crowned by the small town of Spoleto. The name Benedict or *Benedictus* means "blessed" and seems to have been given by Providence to him who was destined to become one of the most holy glories of the Church.

Of his family we know that his father's name was Eupropius and that of his mother Abundantia; he also had a sister by the name of Scholastica. Some say that his family were descendants of the Anisii, while others point out that the expression *liberiores genere*, applied to Benedict by St. Gregory, would indicate that he was not of patrician rank, but of a lower provincial nobility, and consequently not of the Anisii family. Be this as it may, his parents were Romans who owned a palace in the Trastevere district, and in the little church of San Benedetto in Piscinicola, which is erected on the very same site, a statue of the Madonna is still shown before which, tradition tells us, Benedict as a child was wont to spend long hours in prayer.

Benedict was still quite young when on his

parents' orders he set out from his home in Nursia, bound for the Eternal City. According to prevailing custom, he was accompanied by his nurse Cirilla. At this time, Rome had not yet suffered the Barbarian invasions which were soon to spread ruin over the city; it was still an active center of intellectual culture and of the arts. But the acquisition of human learning held no attraction for Benedict. At the age of fifteen, while scarcely on the threshold of the world, he refused to engage himself further with such things, and unable to see in the studies which were suggested to him anything beyond inducements to vice and vanity, he forsook family and wealth and renounced all human learning in order to turn more completely to the knowledge of God. Finally, in obedience to the words which Jesus had addressed to the rich youth five centuries before, and "with a mind only to serve God," he resolved to leave Rome for the desert.

If we would grasp the full extent of this renunciation and understand the importance of Benedict's incipient mission, we must recall the social and religious disturbances in Italy at the close of the fifth century, and picture to ourselves the calamities which hovered menacing

over the Latin horizon. The Ostrogoths dominated the peninsula. Theodoric, their king, had seized Ravenna in 493, crushing Odoacer, the leader of the Teuton mercenaries, who in his turn had overthrown the last emperor of the Romans. On the heels of the vandalism with which Attila's Huns had harried the country, the struggle between these two adversaries completed the ruin. The people were crushed by pillage, murder and misery, by the ills without number which are the natural fruits of war. Even though Theodoric, who professed a lively admiration for the Roman civilization, restored a measure of calm and peace for a brief period, the arrival in 536 of Belisarius, sent by Justinian to drive out the Barbarians and to restore Italy to the Empire, marked the beginning of a new era of crime and misfortunes which Totila, king of the Goths, was to bring to its highest peak. We are familiar with the latter's ravages, and with the deliberate brutality with which he attacked Rome in 546, battling down the ramparts and carrying off the inhabitants in his train, so that "for forty days neither man nor beast could live there." The political and social conditions of the whole of Europe hardly showed greater

stability, and it is easily imaginable what must have been the morals of the time.⁵

Especially in Italy, the Empire, to impose itself the more, had long excited the lower passions of the people. Luxury, games, lewdness and carnal pleasures of all kinds seemed necessary elements of daily existence. In spite of the advent of Christianity, a vigorous survival of pagan customs gained a foothold on all levels of the social system. Moreover, paganism was rampant across the entire continent and, if one makes an exception for Wales and Ireland, Arianism dominated most of these countries. Can one then wonder at Benedict's spiritual reaction upon reaching the Roman capital? Can one fail to understand how, in the center of a world where the ideal of the Gospel seemed so shamefully compromised, he should be powerfully seized by the idea of laboring at the work of Christian restoration, he who already bore in his soul the word *Pax*, which word his monasteries were to inscribe over their thresholds as a command and as a symbol?

⁵ A clear and brief résumé of this situation is found in the beginning of Dom G. Butler, *Benedictine Monasticism*.

Subiaco

Leaving Rome behind, Benedict reached the Sabine mountains. He soon came to a halt in a small place called Enfide, quite probably the present Affile, which may be seen east of Olevano. There he lived for some time in the church of St. Peter, according to the custom by which the churches practiced the law of hospitality. He found there men engaged in living in the practice of prayer. Enfide, however, did not prove to be the solitude his soul desired; here was not the desert which he sought. And so he fled secretly from his nurse, left the neighborhood, and betook himself to the gorge of the Anio. The wildness of this uninhabited country pleased him, and as he wandered along he chanced to meet another recluse. This person told him that his name was Romanus and asked him for his destination. They confided in each other, and found that the object of their desire was the same—to find an uninhabited place for meditation. Romanus thought that the goal of their search was to be found at Sublaquoeum,⁶ in the neighborhood of Nero's old villa. Then, after Benedict had invested him with the habit

⁶ Now Subiaco.

of the hermits, Romanus showed him a cave which was remarkably well suited for reflection, and of which St. Gregory wrote that it was "a place of blessed solitude."⁷

For three years Benedict sojourned in this desert with no other witness than Romanus who, himself a monk, was an inmate of a neighboring monastery. There he meditated under nature's protection, alone under the eye of the Most High.⁸ Every day, or almost, Romanus brought him bread and water from the Anio. As, however, an enormous rock overhung the cave and made its entrance almost inaccessible, the helpful monk attached the bread and water-pot to a rope which he let down within reach of Benedict. Later still, he fastened a little bell to the rope, because Benedict would become so totally absorbed in his meditation that without this signal he might not have heeded his friend. Now it happened one day that the evil spirit, giving himself over to jealous spite, threw a stone against the bell and broke it. But his mischief was in vain, and this malicious action did not alter the one's charity or the other's wisdom. We may readily conceive by what patient effort

⁷ *Locus dilectae solitudinis. Dialog., c. 1.*

⁸ *Solus in superni Spectatoris oculis habitavit secum. Dialog., c. iii.*

Benedict each day increased in knowledge of God, and how at the same time a profound experience ripened in his mind, by which gradually the future Rule shaped itself. No one could have known with greater certitude than he, that "the first degree of humility is the fear of God, which a monk should always have before his eyes," and that "a man should be convinced that God sees him from heaven above at every hour, and in every place his actions occur under the eyes of the Godhead."⁹

It is not strange, therefore, that the idea of prayer and of contemplation as essentials at the outset of the religious life, as the Patriarch conceived it, should have established itself in the clear light of those years at Subiaco.

Vigorous in spirit, henceforth, from this self-imposed novitiate, Benedict was now able to leave his strict solitude. All notion of time had gradually been blotted from his mind, and he did not know the year nor the month or day in which he lived. Once a priest from the neighborhood came to him and said: "Arise and let us eat, for to-day is Easter day." "I know that we are at Easter time," answered Benedict, "because I have the privilege of seeing thee."

⁹ *Reg. S. Bened.*, c. vii.

"Well, then," continued the priest, "we must not fast." And he set before him the dishes which in a vision the Lord had commanded him to share with Benedict.

After this holy person had found him out Benedict was discovered by shepherds. At first sight the animal hides in which he was dressed led them to mistake him for a wild beast, but his first words won them immediately, and they recognized in him a man of God. Benedict converted them and they were ready to follow him, to obey him, and to mold their life according to his. Then, as if a further trial were necessary to test his humility and to confirm in his soul the effect of the divine light, temptation appeared before him. In Rome he had known a young girl of great beauty. Why should a dark bird, suddenly alighting, call forth the enchanting image? Making the sign of the cross, he put the evil one to flight, but the beautiful shape remained, hovering before his eyes and captivating his senses. His heart beat uncontrollably for a moment, his mind was in doubt. Should he not return to her? Already his face was turned toward Rome when of a sudden he was struck by a bolt from heaven. Again he was master of himself. He tore off his animal hides, flung himself

into a nettle-thicket and rolled among the briars. Not until the blood flowed from the open wounds of his body did he arise, mortified and sorrowful, but safe from the evil fire of temptation. This thicket may still be seen, and a charming legend pictures to us St. Francis making a pilgrimage to Subiaco and planting there a rose-tree, whose thorns have ever since retained a blood-colored hue, like the roses among which he himself rolled at St. Mary's-of-the-Angels.

From this moment Benedict abandoned physical solitude in order to become the social Apostle demanded by the logic of his mission. The news of his presence spread around Subiaco, and disciples began to come to him. In a place called Vicovaro, not far from his cave and in the direction of Tivoli, a monastery had just lost its abbot. The monks hastened to Benedict and asked him to assume charge of their house. Reading the depths of their souls, the recluse at first refused but finally yielded to their urgent request. However, what he had foretold happened. It was not long before the monks, who were poorly versed in discipline, began to rebel against the wise rigor of their chosen head. Their murmurings changed into complaints, and their complaints into conspiracy. They decided

to free themselves forthwith from their all too strict shepherd, and gave him a poisoned draught, but Benedict broke the cup with a sign of the cross, and said without anger: "May almighty God have pity on you, my brethren. But why have you done this to me? Did I not tell you beforehand that my manner of living does not agree with yours? Go, seek yourselves a father to your own image, for from now on you cannot expect to keep me."¹⁰ He now returned to his solitude, this time, it is true, for a very brief period, sufficient only to meditate on his own course of action after this trial. He then decided to choose his own brethren and with them to build up his work. This choice became simple, for all those in his neighborhood who wished to serve the Lord worthily flocked to him.

Tertullus, a Roman patrician, offered him his son Placidius, and Aquitius, another noble person, brought him his child Maurus. Benedict adopted them at once. Who knows but that the privileged places of these two brothers at the Patriarch's side should have been given them in order that they might stand as masterpieces of Benedictine art? Maurus, the older of the two, was later to travel through Gaul and Placidius

¹⁰ *Dialog.*, c. iii.

through Sicily. At this time, however, Benedict grouped many other disciples about himself, and in a relatively short space of time he had established twelve monasteries around Subiaco, each counting twelve monks under an abbot of his choice.

Was he, then, to establish himself definitely in this neighborhood where he had settled since his departure from Rome? We shall soon see that this was not to be the case, and that an apparently trifling incident was to cause his departure from the vicinity of Subiaco. In the meantime, certain miraculous events recorded by Benedict's biographer will enable us to grasp the supreme importance of prayer in the mind of the recluse.

St. Gregory tells us that three monasteries, built under Benedict's supervision, were perched so high on the mountain that the monks found it an arduous task to climb down to the lake each day in order to draw water. Finally, one day, they complained that "it would be necessary to change the location of their monastery."¹¹ After having consoled them, Benedict sent them on their way. The same evening, however, he climbed the mountain in company with young

¹¹ *Dialog.*, c. v.

Placidius. He first recited a prayer and then placed three stones, one on top of the other, whereupon he returned to his monastery. The next day the brothers came back to him, and he addressed them as follows: "Go, dig out the rock a little in the place where you will find three stones put one on the other: almighty God can make the water spout out even on the crest of a mountain, to spare you the pain of so long a journey." Astonished, the brothers found water oozing out from the rock. They had hardly hollowed it out before the hollow became filled. St. Gregory adds, referring to the supply of water: "It is so plentiful, that even to-day it flows in abundance and runs down to the foot of the mountain."¹²

Equally well does the following incident,¹³ shed light on the power of kindness, second only to the efficacy of prayer. A humble Goth had asked to be admitted to the order, and Benedict immediately complied with his wish. One day he gave him a bill-hook with which to clear the thickets from a small plot of ground surrounding a lake, and the bill-hook flew from its handle and fell into the water. The Goth immediately asked

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, c. vi.

pardon of Maurus, and Maurus told his master. Benedict then took the handle and, bending over the water, plunged it into the lake. When he drew it forth the iron was again in place, and Benedict gave it back to the Goth, saying "Work on, and do not be sad!"

The incident of Maurus walking on the waters offers new testimony to his spirit of charity as well as to his fervent spiritual union with his disciples. Benedict was in his cell, and young Placidius was drawing water from the lake when he was caught by the current and carried the distance of an arrow-thrust. Benedict had a vision of the accident at the time of its occurrence and, calling to Maurus, he said: "Run! This child who has gone to draw water has fallen into the lake, and the current has already swept him a long distance." With the Father's blessing Maurus started off. Although believing that he was walking on firm ground, he was actually walking on the water, and so he reached the drowning youth, seized him by his hair, and returned with him hurriedly. Not until he reached shore, however, did he turn round and become aware of the miracle. Benedict explained that the incident had no other cause than Maurus' obedience, but a touch of tender-

ness is added by Placidius' frank words: "When I was drawn out, I saw above my head the cape of the abbot, and I thought that it was he who lifted me out of the water." In the accounts of the latter part of Benedict's sojourn at Subiaco we shall again meet with examples of his tenderness.

His success, the zeal of all those impelled to join his cause by their desire for a strict religious life, could not fail to kindle jealousy and envy against him. A priest of the neighborhood, by name Florentius, seeing his efforts to prevent pilgrims from joining the Father come to naught, conceived the idea of killing him. To this end he sent him a poisoned loaf of bread. Benedict, who by supernatural intuition was fully aware of this treacherous design, threw the loaf of bread before the raven to whom he daily gave its pittance. "Take this bread," he commanded, "and throw it in a place where no one will find it." The bird fluttered uneasily around the bread, and Benedict repeated his command. Then the raven obeyed and returned three hours later for his daily ration. Baffled, Florentius then turned on the Father's disciples. So it came about that, in the hope of ruining their souls, he sent them temptation in the shape of seven nude

girls who entered the monastery garden and, their hands joined, danced for a long while before the eyes of the young monks.

Benedict understood that it was he rather than his disciples who was the object of Florentius' hatred, and for this reason he decided to leave the place and establish himself elsewhere. He completed the organization of the monasteries at Subiaco, then, taking with him a small number of monks, he departed from these surroundings so dear to his heart. With him gone, perhaps the fury of the evil priest would subside. He set out in the direction of the province of Campania, where Tertullus' father had given him the mountain which overlooks the village of Cassino.

When Benedict was about to start on his journey, the detestable Florentius stood at the top of the terrace, rejoicing over his departure. Of a sudden the terrace crumbled, crushing the man under its stones. Maurus, the disciple, ran after Benedict to bring him news of what had happened, but as he gave evidence of satisfaction in his death, Benedict, whom it grieved, punished him with reproaches and penance.

It was in 523, and at the age of forty-three, that Benedict left the country of Subiaco where

he had built the cradle of Benedictine monasticism. While to indiscriminating minds, his departure may appear as a surrender in the face of evil, it was in its essence a Christian gesture of resignation and humility. Moreover, it was soon clearly to be shown as an important step in the future career of the Father and in the mission which called him elsewhere.

Monte Cassino

At an equal distance from Rome and Naples there is a small station called Cassino. If during the train's brief pause the traveler should look up across the roof of the station-building, he would see, placed like a domino on one of the mountain summits, the monastery which bears its name. This is the place where the small band under Benedict's leadership came to a halt. Since leaving Subiaco they had covered a distance of about a hundred kilometers, and when they reached the municipality of Casinum, where the Romans had established a colony several centuries before, their eyes, sweeping over the mountain, could discern on its crest only a small temple of Apollo, a sacred grove consecrated to Venus, and an altar at which Jupiter was wor-

shipped. Without delay, Benedict and his companions set to work to abolish these traces of ancient paganism. Grove and altars were cut down, and St. Gregory tells us that while they were cleansing the place the devil, wild with fury, assailed Benedict. Although invisible to the eye, he shouted with such force that the brothers heard him cry out to their Father: "Thou cursed, and not blessed one, what hast thou to do with me? Why doth thou persecute me?"¹⁴

For a long time yet the brothers were to experience the effects of his fury, for during the months they labored in building the house of God under Benedict's supervision, the evil spirit never ceased to harass them. First it was a stone needed in the construction which the brothers tried in vain to lift. Suspecting a diabolical ruse, Benedict made the sign of the cross over it and said a fervent prayer. Immediately the stone could be handled with remarkable ease, and when the Father asked that the soil be dug up in the place where it had lain, a bronze idol came to light. Unwittingly the idol was placed in the kitchen, and suddenly a fire broke out of such proportions that the building was almost consumed in the flames. In answer to the cries

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, c. viii.

of the brothers, Benedict appeared and, explaining that this fire had broken out only in their imagination, he opened their eyes, showed them that the building was intact, and said that they had been made sport of by the demon. Scarcely had he warned them, however, before the evil spirit caught them in still more dangerous snares. He overthrew a wall which the brothers were building, and crushed under it a young monk, the son of a decurion. Benedict commanded that the young man be brought to him. He was carried in in a cloth, his limbs dangling and his bones broken. The Father ordered that he be placed in his cell, where he asked to be left alone with him; then he addressed the Lord in prayers so ardent that the young monk soon regained his senses, found his limbs intact and the wall restored, and he was able to return to his brothers and continue with them the interrupted work.¹⁵

In truth these were vain assaults, permitted by God only the better to reveal the power of prayer already manifested in Benedict's soul, which had the strength of an act of divine grace. They did not prevent the Father from erecting against the tower which had served as a shelter during the first days a building which became as

¹⁵ *Dialog.*, c. ix, x, xi.

it were the corner stone of the actual monastery.

The account given us in St. Gregory's *Dialogues* reveals the mission of the great monk clearly in the light of those times. Whether praying in his cell, preaching the Gospel to the peasants of the land who were still wholly steeped in paganism, tilling the fields in the midst of his brothers, or doing works of charity in behalf of the sick and the poor, we see him, indulgent and severe by turns, growing in people's veneration, human enough not to discourage those who were conscious of their weakness but wished to go forward on the road of perfection, and, by all evidence, possessed of God and invested with the pure ideal essential in the divine mind.

In a number of anecdotes, St. Gregory shows him endowed with second sight and with the spirit of prophecy. Some monks had been forgetful of the rule which forbade them to accept food and drink outside the monastery, and Benedict had seen them from his cell. Questioning them upon their return, he caught them in a flagrant lie; nevertheless he pardoned them because they humbled themselves.¹⁶ Again, a devout layman, who in order to share in the

¹⁶ *Dialog.*, c. xii.

benefits of Benedict's prayers had been wont to come fasting to the monastery each year, on one of these occasions had yielded to the temptation to eat when offered food by a traveling companion.¹⁷ When in spite of this shortcoming he asked the Father for his share of the meal, the latter reminded him of his action, but also granted him pardon.

A still better example is found in his meeting with Totila, the king of the Goths, which occurred in 542, that is, a year before his death. Having heard of Benedict's fame, Totila wanted to know whether the illustrious monk was really a privileged recipient of divine favors. He announced his intended visit and then sent an equerry, by name Riggo, whom he had dressed in his royal robes for the occasion. Scarcely had Benedict caught sight of the equerry, when he exclaimed: "My son, take off the garments which thou wearest, they are not thine."¹⁸ At these words Riggo fell on his face, and when he had risen he hastened to inform Totila. The latter then came in his turn, prostrated himself, and in spite of Benedict's entreaties did not dare to rise. The Father then took him by the hand and

¹⁷ Ibid., c. xiv.

¹⁸ Ibid., c. xiv.

spoke to him. "Thou hast done much evil," he said; "cease at length thy work of iniquity. Thou shalt enter Rome, thou shalt go beyond the sea, nine years shalt thou rule, and thou shalt die in the tenth." Totila left, but not without asking for his host's prayers, and from then on he showed himself less cruel. The prophecy was fulfilled from point to point according to Benedict's words.¹⁹

"Thou shalt enter Rome." The destiny of the Eternal City troubled the mind of the great monk. The capital of the Roman civilization—did he not wish it to become the capital of Christian civilization? Only in the light of such a desire can we understand the episode of the Bishop of Capua who came to see Benedict soon after Totila's visit, as described by St. Gregory. Arriving from his see in Apulia, the bishop told of his fear that Rome might be destroyed by the Barbarians. "The Barbarians will not destroy it," answered Benedict, "but storms, lightning, hurricanes, and earthquakes will cause its ruin." Gregory adds: "This prophecy has been fulfilled with astounding accuracy before our eyes."

Still other anecdotes show his gift of prophecy.

¹⁹ *Dialog.*, c. xv.

One day, Theoprobis, whom Benedict's exhortations had converted, found the Father weeping in his cell. "This monastery which I have built," complained he, "all that I have prepared for the brothers, will be wiped out by the Barbarians." Forty years later, in 583, the Lombards actually destroyed the monastery of Monte Cassino.²⁰

Another day he exorcised a cleric of the church of Aquino whom so far no effort had given relief. "Go," Benedict told him, "but take heed that thou askest not for sacred orders; on the day thou shalt receive them the demon will then regain his power over thee." For some years the cleric observed his elder's injunction, but, seeing younger men than himself rise in the hierarchy of the Church, he in turn asked for advancement. Immediately the evil spirit seized him again and did not desist from tormenting him until his death.²¹

Again, there is the episode of the messenger who, having been sent to bring him two bottles of wine, returned with only one bottle and kept the other for himself. "Take heed, my son," said Benedict, "that thou drinkest not of that

²⁰ *Dialog.*, c. xvii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, c. cvi.

flagon which thou hast hidden in the bush, but first be careful to bow it down, and thou shalt find what is within it.” Hardly had the messenger turned the bottle upside down before a snake crept out of it.²² Later, St. Gregory tells us of the adventure of the monk who, having received two handkerchiefs from some religious whom he was sent to exhort, and having kept them contrary to the prescribed custom, immediately was discovered and rebuked by the Father.²³

Not only external events, but also secrets of the heart, were penetrated by his vision, illuminated from on high. Thus we find him one evening seated at table over his meal, while at his side a young scion of a noble family held a lamp for him. All at once he perceived the thought of the young man—“Who is, then, he whom I serve at table, and for whom I hold the lamp? Is it for me to serve thus?” Benedict said: “Why dost thou murmur, brother? Make the sign of the cross over thy heart.” Then he called the brothers and sent the young man, who had acknowledged the accuracy with which the Father had read his thoughts, to bed.²⁴

²² *Dialog.*, c. xviii.

²³ *Ibid.*, c. xix.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, c. xx.

During the famine which desolated the whole of Italy in 539, Benedict had aided the people of his neighborhood, and as a consequence he found the resources of the monastery very nearly drained. The granaries contained only five loaves of bread, and the brothers were in distress over it. Only the Father retained full confidence, saying, "To-day you have not enough, to-morrow you shall have abundance." How great was their astonishment the following day when they discovered two hundred measures of wheat before the convent door! ²⁵

Another miracle of charity is also told. During the same period of calamity a sub-deacon by name Agapitus came to the monastery and asked for oil. The whole supply on hand consisted of a few drops at the bottom of a single vessel. Nevertheless, Benedict ordered the brother in charge of the cellar to give it to him immediately, which this altogether too jealous guardian deliberately neglected to do. Benedict was indignant when he became aware of this disobedience, and in order that there should remain no trace of it he caused the vessel to be thrown from a window overlooking a ravine, covered with rocks. However, the vessel and the oil it con-

²⁵ Ibid., c. xxi.

tained remained intact. Unmoved in his determination, and the while reprimanding the brother in charge of the cellar, Benedict then had the vessel returned to the sub-deacon.²⁶ Afterwards he began to pray with those present before an empty stoppered jar, and without delay the stopper rose up and the jar overflowed with oil which ran down to the ground, nor did it stop flowing until the moment Benedict ceased praying. Then once more rebuking the disobedient monk, he taught him the almighty power of God and the unlimited power of faith.²⁷

Other equally marvelous tales show us Benedict translated in spirit to places at a distance from the spot where his body remained, and there he operated in a direct manner, just as if he had been materially present.²⁸ We read of the application of his power to the dead in the twenty-first chapter of the *Dialogues* as well as in the accounts of the touching adventure of the young monk who, burning with love for his parents, hastened to see them without having first asked the Father's blessing, and fell dead on their threshold.²⁹ Hardly had he been buried

²⁶ *Dialog.*, c. xxviii.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, c. xxix.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, c. xxii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, c. xxiv.

before the soil gave back his body. Again he was interred, and again he was discovered on the ground. His parents then turned to Benedict and asked his blessing for their son. Benedict administered holy Communion to them, and said, "Go, place with great reverence the body of the Lord on the child's chest, and bury him in such manner." From then on the grave kept the body, and everybody saw in this a new manifestation of the grace which was in Benedict.³⁰

The *Dialogues* reveal to us still other miracles. He exorcised, and he cured the sick. By a prayer, by a simple invocation of the Lord, he obtained health for souls and remedy for disease.³¹ We even find him obtaining from heaven the resuscitation of a poor villager's child.³² Two examples of the Patriarch's sweet kindness are, perhaps, the most touching of all. One is revealed in the story of the poor peasant who had been tied, and who was released by a single look from the man of God; the other is the

³⁰ Many commentators have seen in this passage a proof that St. Benedict was a priest. In his commentary on the Rule of St. Francis, St. Bonaventure holds the opposite opinion. According to him, the Patriarch had refused the priesthood out of humility and in a spirit similar to that which the Poverello had imitated from him. Historians, however, hold almost unanimously that St. Benedict was at least a deacon.

³¹ Cf. *Dialog.*, c. xxv-xxvi, xxx, xxxviii.

³² *Dialog.*, c. xxxi.

holy monk's sublime meeting with his sister Scholastica.

A zealot of the Arian heresy by name Zalla was spreading terror wherever he went by reason of the cruelties which he was pleased to inflict upon those who confessed their faith in the Catholic Church. If a cleric or a monk should so much as venture before his eyes, they did so at the risk of their lives. One day he had vented his ire on a peasant whom he suspected of having some money, and he tormented him so severely that his victim, thinking to put an end to his suffering, admitted that he had placed everything in the hands of St. Benedict. His arms torn by the ropes with which he was tied, the poor peasant was placed in front of Zalla's horse and was ordered to lead the troop to the monastery of Monte Cassino. The moment they reached the summit of the mountain, they saw a monk seated on the threshold of the building, holding in his hands a book and so absorbed in his reading that he did not even raise his eyes to look at his observers. "There is the one of whom I have spoken to thee," explained the peasant, and Zalla called to him in a furious voice: "Hola, stand up, and give me the gold thou hast received from this peasant!" Then

Benedict raised his eyes to Zalla, but at the same time he saw the torn arms of the unfortunate peasant. Scarcely had he fixed his gaze on them than the ropes fell to the ground as if suddenly the fire of lightning had reduced them to ashes. At this sight, Zalla threw himself at Benedict's feet, trembling and filled with fear, and implored him for his pardon and prayers. Benedict, however, did not quit his reading, but commanded his brothers to receive the Barbarian according to the laws of hospitality. After the latter had refreshed himself, he gave him a command to make an end for ever of his foolish cruelty. And Zalla hastened to obey.³³

What vision of divine charity, however, more tender than that of the last meeting of Benedict and Scholastica?³⁴ Once a year Benedict came down from the mountain with his disciples in order to meet his sister in a place near the monastery. One may imagine the happiness of these two souls, united by the twofold bond

³³ *Dialog.*, c. xxxi.

³⁴ The life of St. Scholastica remains for us shrouded in mystery. Tradition has it that she was Benedict's twin sister, that since childhood she was vowed to an exclusively religious life, and that later she founded a monastery of women in a place called Pinmarola, near Monte Cassino. We read in the Visions of Catherine Emmerich of strange details in the childhood of these holy twins. Most probably, this last meeting took place on February 6th, 543.

of blood and piety. But lest it should have been too bold to intrude so earthly a thought into these rare discourses, heavenly subjects alone occupied their conversation. The day was but a prolonged elevation of their hearts to God, and after a light meal in common in the evening each returned to the convent for a period of another year. On this occasion, night began to fall while they were still at table, and Scholastica suddenly bent over towards her brother and said: "Let me pray thee not to leave me this night, that we may speak of the joys of heavenly life until morning." "What sayest thou, sister?" replied Benedict. "In no way can I pass the night outside the monastery."

At this moment the sky was so clear that no least cloud was visible on the horizon. But when she heard her brother's refusal, the holy nun joined her hands, placed them on the table and hid her face in them, and then began to pray to the Lord with the whole fervor of her heart. When she raised her head again, a terrible uproar of thunder and lightning filled the sky. Suddenly the rain began to pour with such fury that the country seemed flooded, and Benedict, even had he tried, would not have been able to leave the house. He noticed that Scholastica

wept profusely, and he understood that the virgin's devout tears had turned the serenity of the sky into a torrent of storm. "O, sister, what hast thou done?" he cried out. "May the almighty God forgive thee." But Scholastica answered: "I have prayed thee, and thou hast not wished to hear me, therefore have I prayed my Lord, and he has answered my prayer. Now, if thou canst, leave and go back to thy monastery." Benedict, who had been loath to remain, now found himself constrained to do so despite himself, because, observes St. Gregory, "God is love, and he that has loved most receives first." With the strong will of the great monk conquered by the tenderness of a virgin who was all love, does it not seem that the divine blessing spread itself more sweetly thus than in furrow more severely plowed? They remained awake throughout the night, surfeiting themselves with holy words on the spiritual life.³⁵

Three days after these hours of illumination, Benedict was in his cell, his eyes raised in prayer, when he saw his sister's soul leave its body and soar heavenward. The immaculate soul appeared in the form of a dove. He fol-

³⁵ *Dialog.*, c. xxxiii.

lowed her with his eyes until she disappeared in the heights of the firmament. Then of a sudden, overwhelmed with joy by such glory, Benedict announced this holy death to his brothers. He gave thanks to God in hymns and praises, and without delay sent for the body of the virgin, which he wished laid in the tomb prepared for him. "Thus it happened," writes St. Gregory, "that having ever been but one single soul in God, they saw their bodies united in one single tomb."³⁶

Benedict did not long survive the blessing of this death. From the very window through which he had beheld his sister's soul soaring to heaven, his eyes were to encompass the vision of his own near end. First, however, another truly miraculous vision allowed him to contemplate a strange and grand spectacle.

Servandus the deacon, abbot of a monastery of the campagna, built earlier by the patrician Liberius, came from time to time to discourse with Benedict on the high subjects which occupied their minds. At the hour for rest Servandus installed himself in the lower part of the tower, while Benedict retired to his cell on the upper floor. At this peaceful moment, while the

³⁶ *Dialog.*, c. xxxiv.

brothers slept not far from them, the Father standing in his window began to pray to the Lord as the hour for Matins drew near. There he stood when suddenly a light invaded the darkness. This light which in splendor surpassed that of day came down from heaven. All at once, as if gathered into the space of a sun-ray, the whole world appeared to him, and he saw in this shining shaft the soul of Germanus, Bishop of Capua, as a globe of fire, carried by angels. In a loud voice Benedict called Servandus and related the marvel to him. Later he sent a messenger to Capua and learned that the bishop had actually passed away at the very moment of his vision.³⁷

Shortly after this event, Benedict announced to some of the disciples among whom he lived, and to some brothers who were far away, that the time had come when he was to die. He asked secrecy of the former, and prophesied to the latter the sign which would reveal his death to them. Six days before the end he asked that his tomb be opened. When he felt himself con-

³⁷ *Dialog.*, c. xxxv.—This sublime vision excited many comments by theologians and others, among them St. Thomas Aquinas and Montalembert, who writes in his *Moines d'Occident*: "The sun-ray in which St. Benedict saw the world gathered, is the Benedictine rule."

sumed by fever, he called his brothers and had himself carried to the oratory where he received holy Communion. He was aware of the power which was diffused through his being by the Body and Blood of the Lord, and wanted to stand upright. His arms were weak, however, and he rested them on two of his monks. In this position, with his arms outstretched towards heaven, he gave up his soul in the breath of a last prayer.

On that day, as he had foretold, two monks, one within the monastic enclosure and the other outside, saw in one single vision a road entirely covered with carpet and resplendent in the light from innumerable lamps, which began at his cell and reached the firmament in a straight line. There appeared before their eyes the figure of a person sparkling with light and invested with an air of grandeur. He asked them what this road was, which they beheld in such ecstasy, and, when they admitted that they did not know, he said: "It is the road by which Benedict, the beloved of the Lord, has gone to heaven." ³⁸

Thus the soul of the great Patriarch entered into Eternity on the twenty-first day of March, 543. His body was buried in the oratory of St. John the Baptist, in the very place built by his

³⁸ *Dialog.*, c. xxxvii.

care after he had overthrown the altar of Apollo. There he still rests side by side with his loving sister Scholastica.

St. Gregory tells that on the day following his death many miracles occurred, appearing as so many witnesses to his sanctity. "In the places where their bodies rest," writes the august pontiff, "there is no doubt but that the holy martyrs may perform a great number of miracles, and they will not fail to do so; for those who invoke them with a pure soul, their miracles are numberless."³⁹ At the end of the narrative in which he tells of the great Patriarch's death, he also asserts that "in the cave in which he dwelt at Subiaco, he continues to cause miracles to occur, when the faith of those who invoke him ask them of him."⁴⁰

St. Gregory tells us of one of these miracles, the symbolical value of which will not easily escape a mind familiar with mystic realities. In the vicinity of Subiaco there lived a poor woman whose distresses, it seemed, had permanently disordered her mind. Day and night she could be seen roaming through fields and forest, and if perchance she rested for a while, it was

³⁹ Ibid., c. xxxviii.

⁴⁰ Ibid., c. xxxvii.

only for lack of breath or by some other extreme necessity.

Thus, one day, she went into the cave of the blessed Benedict without knowing what place it was. She remained there until the following morning, when she left, but it was now found that her mind was as sane as if she had never been afflicted, and all her life this balance remained undisturbed.⁴¹

May we not agree with certain commentators that this woman is typical of errant humanity, once given over to disorder, crime, and dissipation, and that the miraculous healing symbolizes the moral miracle to which Benedict gave testimony in the name of Christianity?

The Rule

Such was the life of one who, "blessed by grace and in name, from childhood had the heart of an old man, and overreaching his age with his character, delivered not his soul to sensual pleasure."⁴² The accounts which we read in the second book of the *Dialogues* are like a symphony to the mind, sounding with the strongest reso-

⁴¹ *Dialog.*, c. xxxviii.

⁴² *Ibid.*, Preamble.

nance in our innermost being. Their balance, their wisdom, their freshness, give them a deeply spiritual significance.

Their merits, however, would not suffice to recreate for us the soul of the great monk, unless we added to them the explicit word in which his work and mission are summed up—I mean, the Rule. St. Gregory the Great himself writes: “Indeed he composed a rule for the monks, remarkable for its discretion and for the clearness of its language. If one desires to know more deeply his character and his life, one will find in the teachings of said rule all the acts of his government, because the holy man was not able to teach in a manner other than that which he himself practiced.”⁴³

Such is the importance of the Rule of St. Benedict that universally the customs of monastic life are governed by it. Even in the orders which seem quite unlike the Benedictine it would not be difficult to find irrefutable evidence of its spiritual influence. It may be said that this Rule remains the Mother-Rule par excellence. For this reason the author of these lines cannot pretend to sound the depth or measure the breadth of this source. Only its more general

⁴³ Ibid., c. xxxvi.

aspects will be touched upon in the course of these Hours. Let the reader enlarge for himself the vistas which are here merely suggested.⁴⁴

First of all, when and where was this Rule written? Around this subject has grown up a discussion which is not yet ended. Some would have it that it originated at Subiaco, and others assert, that it was composed at Monte Cassino. We, for our part, lean towards the opinion of Dom Butler, which holds out for Monte Cassino.⁴⁵ The learned monk of Downside was correct in interpreting the sixty-fifth chapter of the Rule which prescribed that the *præpositus*, later known as prior, should be appointed by the abbot and not by the bishop. As a fact, in the earliest days of the order rifts had been caused by reason of appointments made by the bishop. In telling of the founding of a monastery at Terracina from Monte Cassino, St. Gregory asserts that Benedict appointed the *præpositus* and the abbot at the same time, a procedure contrary to the ruling of the sixty-fifth chapter. Since the holy Patriarch could not have made himself guilty of such inconsistency, it seems reasonable

⁴⁴ It is the author's intention some day to devote a whole volume to this Rule. At the present he intends only to point to such parts as cannot well be ignored.

⁴⁵ Dom G. Butler, *Benedictine Monasticism*, beginning of volume.

to assume that the Rule was composed at a date later than the establishment of this foundation, that is to say, at Monte Cassino. It is noticeable also in other parts of the Rule that it corresponds more strictly with the practices at Monte Cassino than with those at Subiaco, where the community of twelve small monasteries, housing twelve monks each, knew but one single central authority, that of Benedict himself. With Dom Butler, we may therefore draw the conclusion that the Patriarch wrote his Rule at Monte Cassino towards the end of his life, and after much experience and long meditation.

Another question presents itself in regard to his sources, for Benedict did not meditate on his own experiences only. He naturally also consulted the testimony of those who before him had occupied their minds with plans for a life consecrated to the work of God. Benedict was far more learned than some of his commentators have imagined him to be, and he had an extensive knowledge of biblical writings as well as of the tradition of the Church Fathers and of the Fathers of the Desert. We recall his own admission in the final chapter of the Rule: "But for him who would hasten to a life of perfection,

there are the teachings of the holy Fathers, the following whereof brings a man to the height of perfection. Indeed, what page or what word of divine authority is there in the Old and the New Testament that is not a most safe rule of human life? Or, again, what book of the holy Catholic Fathers is there that doth not loudly teach us the straight road that leads to our Creator? Moreover, the Conferences of the Fathers, their Institutions and Lives, as also the Rule of our Father St. Basil, what else are they but an example of monks who lived and obeyed as was fitting, and also a source of virtues?"⁴⁶

These are in part St. Benedict's sources. In fact, the Rule shows on every page how very familiar holy Scripture was to the great legislator. He also had a vast knowledge of monastic tradition. He was intimately acquainted with the life of St. Anthony and with that of St. Pachomius, with Rufin's *History of the Monks*, with the *Sentences* of the Egyptian Fathers, especially Cassian, to whom he freely refers, and with the Rules of "our father, St. Basil," of Macarius, and of still other Fathers, and also with that of St. Cæsarius of Arles. Here and there in the text of the Rule one finds excerpts from

⁴⁶ *Reg.*, c. lxxiii.

St. Leo, St. Augustine, St. Cyprian, and St. Jerome.

It becomes evident that in St. Benedict's soul divine grace was at work on rare elements, and one may easily conceive the fullness of spiritual light which the union of so much culture and experience made manifest in the form of this Rule.

The Rule, which is written in the current Latin of the fifth century, comprises a Prologue and seventy-three chapters. There are those who think that they have discovered in it a clearly definite plan. Dom Butler ⁴⁷ sees in it rather a grouping of chapters, bearing on the following points, viz., the nature of the Rule for cenobites, the government of a monastery, principles of asceticism, the canonical office, the deans and the dormitory, the penitential code, the administration of temporal goods, the daily life, entrance conditions, appointment of abbot and prior, the cloture, and community life.

To gain a conception of the object of the rule beyond what may already have been surmised, let us turn to the holy Patriarch. "We have written this rule," he says, "that by observing it in monasteries, we may show ourselves to have

⁴⁷ *Op., cit.*

some degree of goodness in life, or at least a beginning of the life that we should lead.”⁴⁸

What marvelous humility, this, which alone would suffice to shed light on the spirit of the great saint. Although the Rule refers frequently for analogies to those who had formulated their Rules before Benedict, it nevertheless immeasurably surpasses the earlier Rules in spirituality and in clarity of expression. We shall find it so in the course of these Hours. The Benedictine life, molded wholly in submission to the Rule, reveals in its most humble activity as in the unostentatiousness of its aims, the organizing genius of the Patriarch.

Confronted by this life, divided between prayer and labor, do we not often ask ourselves which of the two is greater in him, his sense of the divine, or his understanding of human nature? In the course of a carefully written essay, a Father of the abbey of Mardesous⁴⁹ sums up the qualities through which it seems to him that St. Benedict has realized the monastic ideal in the most human manner possible. They are

⁴⁸ *Reg.*, c. lxxiii.—Let us point out that the only commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict, written in our days, is that of Dom Delatte, Abbot of Solesmes, published in Paris in 1913.

⁴⁹ Dom T. Ryelandt, *Essai sur la physionomie morale de saint Benoît*, 1924, Abbaye de Mardesous.

kindness, faithfulness in observance of the Rule, simplicity, greatness, and organizing ability. It is but right, also, that one should recognize the tact with which the Rule softens what the austerity of the Fathers of the Desert carried to excess, striving to establish a proportion between the forces of human nature and the rigor of the ideal, which fact, far from jeopardizing the attainment of the goal, cannot fail to imbue the struggle with new energy. Is this not what Bossuet expressed so forcefully and with so much truth in his panegyric of the saint? "This Rule," he says, "is an epitome of Christianity, a learned and mystic abstract of the whole doctrine of the Gospel, of all the Institutions of the Fathers, and of all the counsels of perfection. There appear eminently prudence and simplicity, humility and courage, severity and mildness, freedom and dependency; there, also, correction in all its firmness, compliance in all its charm, command in its rigor, and subjection in its repose, silence in its gravity and speech in its gracefulness, power in its activity and weakness in its stay. Nevertheless, my Fathers, he calls it a beginning, in order to inspire you always with fear."

One would be singularly blind not to grasp the meaning and the efficacy of this marvelous bal-

ance of ideal forces with human energies. It is by reason of its high virtue that the Rule of the Patriarch has passed victoriously through the centuries, and that it remains to-day as in the past the foundation of all life devoted to divine perfection. Only through this Rule are souls tempered and true wisdom gained, only through this Rule freedom of the mind and peace of the heart won. Does one not feel the precious peace in each narrative told by St. Gregory? The Rule is the inspiration of the soul and the rhythm and light of life. It is this Rule which animates the theme of these Hours and which is an ever-present symbol, traced by the Father on the threshold of his convents as on the forehead of his posterity.

THE BENEDICTINE HOURS

THE BENEDICTINE HOURS

I

THE VIGILS

DOM MARTENE, the famous liturgist of the Congregation of Saint-Maur, tells in his *De antiquis monachorum ritibus* that the early monks rose three times during the night to chant the praises of the Lord. Elsewhere Ruffin holds up for our admiration the ardor of these brothers, who did not hesitate to give but four hours to sleep so as to be able to consecrate four hours to psalmody and another four to labor.

St. Benedict, however, more mindful of the needs of human nature, thought well to subordinate a great amount of piety to a wisdom, twofold holy, since it bore within itself not only the characteristics of virtue, but gave evidence as well of humility in devotion. It was his desire that his disciples should sleep "a little more than half the night" so as to be able to rise *digesti ac alacres*, that is, refreshed and alert, at the eighth hour, which was the hour of the nocturnal vig-

ils.¹ Thus one slept peacefully in the early Benedictine monasteries. Nevertheless, to sleep beyond the moment fixed for rising was a fault which was severely punished. At the given signal the brothers were to exhort one another and without delay set about the work of God. To avoid any reason of disorder, watchmen were designated each evening whose task it was to give the signal.

This task was not always accomplished without difficulties. In those days clocks were not yet in use, and the watchmen were obliged to lie in wait for the eighth hour. We may have heard from old accounts that people at times relied on the cock-crow, but Cassian tells us that more generally there were no guides to time in the convents of old other than the stars of heaven. No doubt these guides were full of celestial poetry, but their practical value grew less as the hours advanced, or as some cloud drew up to hide them from watchful eyes.

The unfortunate watchmen then endeav-

¹ The eighth hour of the night corresponds approximately with 2.30 A. M. for the winter period, which the saint had fixed between November 1st and the beginning of Lent, the summer period running from Easter to September 13th. Day and night comprise each twelve hours in the Benedictine Rule, night beginning at sunset and day at sunrise. One may see that St. Benedict established the division of the Benedictine Hours according to the order of nature.

ored to measure the allotted period of sleep by the time required for the recitation of a certain number of psalms. In the quiet dormitory, where the stillness was broken only by the rhythm of even breathing, they maintained the spiritual atmosphere by the unbroken measure of their silent psalmody, and when the last verses were nearly reached, they tip-toed noiselessly to the church, there to light the lamps for office and then announce by light bell-strokes that the time for chanting Matins was at hand.

In other monasteries, however, a custom was practiced whose touching simplicity is worthy of recall. The watchmen did not go to the church, but advanced instead in a humble attitude towards the middle of the dormitory to the bed in which the abbot slept. They remained standing there for a moment, enfolding in a final prayer him whom they venerated as the soul of the place. Then, in an almost imperceptible whisper, they ventured to recite the verse: *Domine labia mea aperies, et os meum annuntiabit laudem tuam*, "O Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim Thy praise," and, emboldened by the holy words, they touched the abbot's feet, the while pronouncing the single word, *Deus*.

Thus, like dawn before the break of day, the

thought of the divine was a part of the first stirrings of their daily life. The abbot arose without delay, went to the oratory, rang the bell for the Vigils and began to pray slowly, while one after another his brothers grouped themselves around him. These in their turn, when opening their eyes, had lifted up their souls to God. They had thanked Him for having guarded their sleep, and asked Him to bless the new-born day. Before kneeling in the choir each made a visit to the various altars; before solemnly adoring the Lord they did homage to the saints in the friendly atmosphere of the shadowy vaults. On their way they prayed for the dead and living, who form the great family of Christ.

Soon a new stroke of the bell bade them seek their places in the choir. There they recited fifteen psalms, then remained waiting, prostrated with fervor under the invisible eye of God, in an outpouring of such prayer that each might think his voice nearer to God than to his own lips.²

Finally a last stroke of the bell was heard. The novices now entered, conducted by their masters, and the office began. It is apparent

² We read these edifying words in Dom Martène, *De antiquis monachorum ritibus*, l. I, c. I, 27: "*Tunc prostratus in loco congruo effundat preces in conspectu Domini magis corde quam ore, ita ut illius vox vicinior sit Deo quam sibi.*"

that the nocturnal Vigils were delayed by long preparations which, however, did not prevent some of the brothers from adding a whole set of prayers to those prescribed. But, in the course of centuries and under the influence of a great many abbots, these primitive customs were modified; to-day they have almost completely disappeared.

The scene of the monks' rising, formerly so picturesque, presents an entirely different aspect in our days. The reason for this is that the community dormitory has ceased to exist and that, since about the fifteenth century, individual cells have taken its place. To-day when the signal for Matins has sounded, a brother takes a lantern and goes from door to door pronouncing the words, *Benedicamus Domino*, to which he immediately receives the answer from within, *Deo gratias*. The monks must then make ready but half an hour is allowed for the morning toilet.

Matins have retained the fresh beauty of the early days. The order long since established is still observed in chanting this office. It always begins with the invocation *Deus in adiutorium meum intende*, "O God, do Thou hasten to my aid," and with the *Domine labia mea aperies*,

"O Lord, open Thou my lips," which ascends into the loftiness of the church like a child's outcry, that begs its Father to open its lips so that it may open its soul in a confiding prayer, and the whole choir proclaims with a ringing *Gloria Patri* the very object of the morning exercises.

Suddenly, a great surge of prayer mounts against the dim vaults as if to carry them on high. Two young monks have approached the lectern and intoned the psalm, *Venite exultemus*, "Come, let us rejoice." It is the invitatory, the words by which the brothers are invited to adore God. It inspires every heart with the ardor of new faith.

The last shadows of sleep have been dispersed and the divine office can now be rendered in full splendor. The psalms are chanted, twelve in number, in memory of the twelve gates of the Eternal City, and to recall the twelve hours of the night. Between the psalms recurs in accents of eternity the insinuating, pregnant modulation of the *Gloria Patri*, which is called the doxology, and the monks, who have remained standing during the psalmody, prostrate themselves at each final verse in order to engage in a short silent prayer.³

³ St. Benedict called this ceremony the *reverentia orationis*.

The reading of each lesson in turn follows. In the days of St. Benedict it was often drawn out beyond measure, and frequently enough some brother would succumb to the temptation of sleep. Wisely and prudently the abbot would let one of the monks take a lantern from time to time and observe the attitude of the choir. That monk would watch zealously. Should he see a pair of eyes closing, he would throw the light from his lantern on them three times and, if they still remained closed, he would shake the sleeper vigorously, and then give him the lantern, and entrust to him the task of continuing this watchful exercise.

The choir responds to the reader with chanted antiphones, which change in pitch with the voice of the different chanters. The abbot gives his blessing, the hebdomadary ⁴ recites the prayers, and all bow towards the altar for a moment of silence and recollection, the poignant sentiment of which cannot be imagined by one who has never crossed the threshold of a convent. Then, with cowls drawn over their faces, the monks again seat themselves in their stalls, where they remain until the moment when they chant the

⁴ From the Latin, *hebdomada*, which means "week." The monk thus designated was charged with chanting the conventual Mass and directing the choir during the week.

powerful and magnificent *Te Deum*, the ancient hymn of St. Niceta, missionary bishop of Dacia.

Afterwards an acolyte opens the Sacred Book, and in the trembling light from a wax taper the abbot reads in a loud voice the Gospel of the day. Shadows still linger around the capitals and in the vaults and arches of the church. Yet, as the morning office nears its conclusion, a thousand heavenly voices are already chanting the rising of the sun, all of nature, mysterious and omnipresent, joining in bright hymns, in songs to the dawn, flowers opening their chalices, Matins, Matins, holy light, vanguard of life.

II

MY FIRST MATINS

IT was late in the evening when I made my way into a Benedictine monastery for the first time. The curfew had just rung, and all the monks had reached the *Dormitorium*. Only the porter, a lay brother, accompanied me to a sort of small cellar, where he served a light collation. Later I walked up a high, winding stairway under his guidance, and after passing through a long stretch of corridors with double Gothic windows I finally came to the room which I was to occupy. Without speaking, but with a slight bow, he left me to myself.

To tell the truth, I felt strangely out of place and my first contact with the monastic silence gave me the sensation of a veil falling over my shoulders, wrapping itself around me like a sepulchral cape. The hours passed—long hours it seemed to me—and it was still night in my cell when a hardly perceptible noise aroused me. It sounded like a strangely thin murmur, which reached my ear, only to die away without leav-

ing any possibility of discovering what it was or whence it came.

I dressed quickly, then left my cell and walked softly, holding back my breath. The long, cloistered gallery, of which I had been unable to get a good view in the evening, seemed impressive and beautiful to me. Absolute silence and solitude reigned there, grave and commanding. The depth of the gallery seemed uncertain, losing itself in heavy shadows in the distance. Beyond the pointed arches of the windows I saw a cloudy, gray sky, below which the inner court revealed itself in motionless outline, divided by its two cross walks like milky, gray ribbons.

I ventured a few steps in the semi-darkness of the cloister, my ears tense, letting myself be guided by the alluring murmur that rumbled like a subterranean stream, very softly and in uncertain and evasive notes. Spreading momentarily into fullness, it would suddenly die down again to a mere echo, drowned in a gravelike silence. Finally I heard it more closely, having reached a door from beyond which came a tremulous humming of prayer, and as I passed through I found myself all at once under a small arch, bordering upon a vast space from the pit of which arose a harmony of voices, which seemed without timber

but blended in a strangely flexible kind of rhythm and accent.

The small arch was that of a secluded gallery, perched on the ridge of the pilasters of two columns, which stood up from the choir. The vast space was the majestic nave of the abbey church, enlarged by shadow play. The voices arose from the stalls but I could hardly trace the outline of the monks which, despite the burning lamps on the chanters' stand, were hidden in the enveloping darkness.

This was my first impression of Matins and instantly it recalled the memory of a catechism class, during which I had listened with rapt attention to the description of the early Christian vigils, given by a priest of whom I was fond. The Christians would gather before daybreak to chant the praises of the Lord. Late pagan wanderers could see their silent outlines passing furtively along the Roman roads or among alleys and tombs, and since it was impossible to imagine what business called them out at such an hour, they were made the victims of the most evil accusations.

"The first Christian communities." These words aroused in my soul a sense of mystery and beauty. The assemblies in the night, this life

of adoration offered before the light of dawn, these souls, eager to greet their chosen Master before the imperial salutation of the sun, all this threw my dazzled imagination into pious rapture.

These new feelings, these first faint impressions, suddenly stirred my already moved senses to all the sweetness of their appeal, and I gave myself over to them without restraint. I felt as if enveloped in dawn's caress. The voices soared around me, as if their ardor would lift me into heights undreamed, and in the delightful confusion of this rapture the sacred chant carried words pure as the wax-tapers of my childhood, cool as a spiritual mist—*Deus meus, ad te de luce vigilo*, "My God, for Thee do I watch even since the dawn of day." *Praevenerunt oculi mei ad te diluculo, ut meditarer eloquia tua*, "My eyes are lifted up to Thee at the dawn of day, that I may meditate on Thy words."

Anticipating dawn and symbolical of life to come, Matins seem to be a link between the remotest past and the most distant future. A supernatural something stirs in these vigils, uninterrupted since the earliest ages. The memory of the young Christian enthusiast lives in them with an ever real presence. Their external ex-

pression is ever similar, it is the same prayer of dawn, daily and eternal, and, more, it is the light of the Spirit which is never snuffed out, even when sleep has confounded things and beings, the pure flame which for the peace of human souls watches unwearyingly at the mysterious threshold of the beyond.

But the mysterious threshold, the thought of which too often gives us anguish, reveals itself in the cloister in a halo of bliss, which makes hope tremble in feverish joy before it, and love chant in transfiguring voice, and the hour of the vigil, an hour in time, rolls out beyond hours and time into the whole vastness of life. One hardly knows whether the men who have broken their sleep in the cloister before the birds of heaven have stirred in their nests, are truly sons of the great, poor humanity which is asleep.

While listening for the first time to the monastic Matins, I remembered the enthusiasm with which St. John Chrysostom wrote of the monks of Antioch. "Scarcely have they risen when they chant the psalms of David—and with what sweet harmony. Neither harp, nor flute, nor any other instrument of music, can utter a melody comparable to that which is heard to rise, in the silence of that lone hour, from the lips of these

holy men. And so with the Angels—with the Angels I say—they sing the *Laudate Dominum de coelis*, while we men of the world are still asleep, or, it may be, half awake, and even then thinking of nothing but our own miserable affairs.”¹

I also remembered that in the early ages the vigils were celebrated not only by clerics but also by the laity,² as told in a charming description of her journey by a devout Spanish lady who had come to the holy places towards the end of the fourth century. “Every night,” wrote the Abbess Etheria, for it is of her I wish to speak, “before cock-crow, the doors of the Anastasis were opened, and the *monazontes* and *parthenæ*—the ascetes and virgins—come in, not only these, but lay-folk besides, men and women, who desire to keep vigil.” In consecrating this hour to divine praises, as did the early Christians of Jerusalem and Antioch as well as the very first ascetes, the monks of to-day do but continue a very pure tradition.

Of all this I had a very vivid experience that night when the sound of a little bell and the echo

¹ St. Chrysostom, *Homil. xiv, in I. Tim.*, 14.

² Up to the end of the eighteenth century there existed in Paris a *Confrérie des Matins*, a sodality of devout lay-folk, who every night assisted at Matins at Notre Dame.

of the psalmody awakened me, while nature's voices were still in silent slumber. It made me feel a childlike joy, because it was not only the innocent catechism hours, but also the vigils of the first friends of Jesus—of the first faithful of Christ—that they chanted far back in my memory. It was my childhood, and it was more, the whole childhood of a holy family and of a great race.

My sorrow was therefore intense when a few months ago I passed one of our old French Benedictine abbeys and found it abandoned, empty, and denuded. I gazed at it a long while in silence with my heart aching. The massive walls, the slender arches, the old but robust trees, the firm towers, the beautiful steeple, all these silent things, breathed an air of the cemetery, an air of days gone by.

I mused. No more do the chimes ring out, which used to call to office and resound over the blessed peace of the countryside. No more do their notes take flight through space, to sound their even summons like soothing thoughts. When the last shadows of night fall, whither shall our souls turn henceforth to be rocked in the prayers of yesteryear, reborn each day on the lips of monks in cell and choir, heard during the

summer months even before the chant of the birds?

Perfumes of dew rising through Gothic bays, sweet fragrance of heath and hay, of flowers, gardens, brooks and ponds, and of sleeping forests, was it not for you that Matins dawned afresh? Your breath met us in the monastery court, in the long cloisters, in the silence of the choir, its light essence mingled in the melopœia of the divine chant, and the humble brothers sucked in with it the breath of heaven. When now I meet you again, parted from your brothers in spirit, something essential seems lacking in the peace of your life. You, too, used to chant the office of Matins.

Matins, it is all that and so much more. To understand it one must have felt upon one's lips the bang of that sharp little bell, the chill of its call, and its dew, like a dew of grace.

III

LAUDS AND PRIME

THE state of perfection is not part of our nature. But it would be a grave sin to invoke the sight of our misery in order to detach us from the contemplation of our ideal. It would imply a negation, and we cannot live on a negation. No matter how far from our object of love we know ourselves to be, we do not despair of possessing it so long as the music of its appeal is not extinct in our soul, and since things of the spirit live by preference in the hidden intimacy of our being, none of us has the right to destroy their reality, be it ever so vague and fleeting.

These wholly individual matters make up the pure treasure of human dreams. They constitute the interior heaven, where the shadows of sorrow and the lights of hope move ceaselessly. To the faithful they assume the majesty of vast temples and the mystical sweetness of obscure chapels. The brothers who have given themselves to God let their thought dwell there, bathed in mysterious, dazzling brightness, as a sacred image of the state of perfection.

But even this all-enveloping thought is not immune from the doubts which occasionally come to disturb it. The experience of the very first monks leads us to this reflection, although the splendor of their zeal commands our respect. Between Matins and Lauds, especially in winter, there were long hours during which there was no recitation of office. When the Vigils were over, some monks would show an inclination to weakness, even to the extent of going back to bed, preferring its warmth and the pleasure of sleep to mortification of the body. The great reformers of monastic life opposed this sin vigorously. St. Benedict of Aniana did not even hesitate to threaten with excommunication whosoever should be found guilty of it, and only the sick brothers, and those who had been obliged to undergo bleeding found grace before this rigorous prescription.

To what task, then, were these intermediary hours to be consecrated? The rule of the holy Patriarch gives the answer: "The time left over after the Vigils (that is to say, Matins) shall be employed in the study of the Psalter or the lessons by those brothers who are in need thereof."¹ Accordingly, from the sixth century

¹ *Reg. S. Bened.* c. viii.

on, one could see the children and the young monks direct their steps to the chapter-house after Matins. There they studied the lessons and learned the Psalter, which they were obliged to chant almost entirely by heart in the course of the offices.

This was the custom in the congregation of Valladolid, where the novices and the young monks, who had not yet been professed five years, assembled in the *Lamparilla*, close to the heater. The hebdomadary presided over this nocturnal assembly, and the novice-master would come and make sure that each one had performed his task conscientiously. The monks who had completed their training performed other exercises. Some paced the cloisters in silence, meditating on the Scriptures or on pious thoughts, others devoted themselves to manual labor of a kind suitable for this period of reflection, such as maintenance of the lamps.

In this manner the monks were kept occupied until the first rays of dawn which gave the signal for Lauds for, according to the will of the venerable Patriarch, Lauds were to be recited at the break of day, *illucescente aurora*. At the end of each night, the blessing of early Christianity thus spreads itself over the awakening

day. When the *Kyrie eleison* thrice has sounded its imploring notes, when the abbot has mumbled the *Pater Noster* and the brothers have responded with *Sed libera nos a malo*, the day is already bright with the halo of the Vigils. In our days, Lauds follow immediately upon Matins, and this arrangement does away with the temptation to which so many unfortunate brothers were wont to succumb.

The office of Prime, also, has a similar reason for its existence. It was unknown among the early monks. The first "Rule of Vigils" mentions it for Sunday only, and it is the Rule of St. Benedict which gives us a description of it.²

Sleepiness was not considered a good excuse when some unfortunate monk happened to be late. The sun rose over the fields, the rooster crew, the rustling of the leaves in the trees mingled with the chirping of a host of birds, the light played reflected through the windows of the church all the way up to the stalls, and a whole new, warm life arose from the east, spreading its rays over all things. And yet here and

² "At Prime, three psalms shall be recited separately, and not with one single *Gloria*. The hymns for this hour shall be recited after the versicle *Deus in adiutorium meum intende*, and before commencing the psalms. When the three psalms have been finished, a lesson, a versicle, and *Kyrie eleison* shall be recited, then dismissal." *Reg. S. Bened.*, c. xvii.

there at the ends of the choir were heads still heavy with sleep and haunted by soft visions of the dormitory.

The monks of Bethlehem, who were very anxious to preserve the ascetic discipline in its original integrity, wished to prevent such unfortunate weakness. Consequently they decided to use the time between Lauds and Terce for a new office and so the hour of Prime was established—"another Matins," as Cassian called it, who at the time was sojourning among these monks.

Prime thus became the prayer of daybreak, the devotion in which each one asks God's blessing on the new day. Moreover, it recalled the hour when Jesus received blows in His face in Caiaphas' court and was dragged before Pilate. It was at that hour, also, that the holy women came to the tomb. It was thus threefold sacred.

So it has remained since the days of Cassian and the monks of Bethlehem. When to-day, towards the last moments of dawn, the rising sun begins to throw its light on the altar, the brothers are found chanting the psalms with which the sun was greeted as early as the end of the fourth century. The ancient prayer has not changed. The souls still commune in the same thought and

under the same forms, the words soar ever towards the new light like transparent incense—words of beauty, such as those of the *Deus qui es sanctorum splendor mirabilis*, “O God, who art the marvellous splendor of the saints”; words of welcome, as in the *Iam lucis orto sidere*, “Now in the sun’s new dawning ray,” words of supplication, such as *Exurge Christe adiuva nos*, “Arise, O Christ, and come to our aid,” ringing out from the lips of the chanter. As Matins sees the first tremors of life in the glimmer of dawn, so Prime opens its eyes upon the sun, all in beauty, promise and light.

In almost all monasteries of to-day the church takes on the appearance of a beehive before the solemn entry of the monks. Hardly has the bell rung the Angelus when, each preceded by a novice or a lay brother, a number of Fathers arrive at the side altars, their heads covered with white amices, and carrying the chalice reverently in their hands. The celebration of the Holy Sacrifice is multiplied. The Lamb is slaughtered for the redemption of the sins of men, and the mystery is completed at the consecrated hands of the priest, while he reads the words of the ritual and performs the beautiful ceremonies in measured gestures and attitudes of humility.

Low Masses follow in unbroken succession until the last Father has fulfilled this function of his sacred ministry, with no witnesses other than pious country people who, at the sound of the bell, come faithfully to this benevolent manifestation of divine grace. Night still lingers under the vaults, and the clear reflections of the lamps are given back from the gold of the altar. In the dusk of this hour the imagination drifts vaguely as on a river of dreams, and the heart pours forth its silent language, tasting a sweetness which it will not know again until evening at Compline. Slowing, irresistibly, it spreads like a calm lake fed by slow rivers, in which the light from heaven alone is reflected, in which alone rests the immensity of peace.

What potent charm these low Masses possess, unsuspected by the city-dweller, and reserved for the recluse of the countryside. What holy energy do they exert to temper the souls who have come to them in purity, in confidence, in friendly ease, to reap from them pleasure to eyes and ears. To these souls each altar is another fire-side, where there is no speech, but where are gathered in silence the supernatural secrets of the Lord.

Without doubt the state of perfection is not

of this world. But at certain moments of super-earthly rapture in these rare refuges, sheltered from the great human maelstrom, is not the distance shortened which parts us from it? It seems nearer at such moments, and as though some of its reality might be grasped by the immaterial fingers of the spirit.

The countryman absorbs this truth in the simple peace of the low Masses. And when by patient efforts the monk has triumphed over the snares of worldly pleasure, he well knows that his soul, resounding with the music of his holy love, carries him on its safe course towards God, while the weight of his first sorrows falls from him. No dawn fails to chant this truth for him in its *Iam lucis orto sidere*, no hour gives him this assurance more joyfully than Prime.

IV

THE CHAPTER

IN every monastery there is a place not far from the church, whose impression is generally one of severity. If the church is the soul ruling the cloistered life, the chapter-house is its administrative head. The one prompts the spirit to supernatural transports, the other administers its temporal needs systematically. Among other tasks, the important one of the distribution of labor takes place there.

Formerly the chapter-house was always built in that part of the cloister that faced the east. Among the devotional exercises practiced there was a reading of a chapter of the Rule, the *capitulum*, and it is from this practice that the house derives the name it has kept ever since.

Oftener than not, a friendly charm surrounds this spot where the members of the community assemble. If the layman could penetrate there, he would witness pleasant family reunions, a little austere, perhaps, but not lacking in that spontaneous humor, which never fails to show itself

where pure souls are gathered. This will be evident when I come to speak of the culps.

As soon as the office of Prime is ended, the brothers form in line and under scrupulous observance of silence march to the chapter, two and two, the oldest first, and the novices in the rear. As soon as they have entered, they exchange a slight bow and then seat themselves.

On crossing the threshold, they come face to face with a crucifix, set up in all its sorrowful simplicity, whose arms in an imploring gesture invite the assembly to recollection. From the center of the hall rises a low, wide column, from which the Gothic arches spread their curves in a many-colored sheaf, and all around are wooden benches fastened to the walls. There the monks sit motionless when the acolyte, whose lectern is placed before the column, begins to chant the martyrology, for this first meeting of the chapter is a new office which follows without transition after Prime; but it is an office of a particular nature, almost that of a family reunion. This becomes apparent at the prayer before labor, at the reading of the necrology, and, above all, at the confession of culps.

On the slow waves of its rhythm the chant of the martyrology, with which the chapter opens,

carries the insinuating flavor of ages gone by, of the days of our ancestors, dim and faded, but still alive on the lips of the acolyte. Like incense the glory of Christianity envelops each word, each name, which carries with it the memory of martyrs, virgins, and confessors, of beloved brothers and sisters, humble and heroic, of the great divine host of witnesses to the faith. Innumerable are these venerable names, and it is impossible to pronounce them all. The thorough Usuard, who gathered them all up into a marvelous treasure, ends by counting more than three hundred for each day of the year. For such commemoration the acolyte's chant does not suffice, and the prayer ends up in the formula which many a brother pronounces with regret that he cannot particularize—"and elsewhere many other holy martyrs and confessors—"

This commemoration is accompanied by the announcement of current feasts. As a fact, each day of the week corresponds to a feria, that is, a feast of our Lord, in addition to which there are special feasts of our Lord, of the Blessed Virgin, and of the saints and martyrs. At the end of the commemoration the hebdomadary pronounces a supplication beginning with these

words, *Isti et omnes sancti*, "These and all saints"—the saints, whose names have just been mentioned and all other saints. In this manner the brothers recommend themselves to the protection of those saints whose names are lost or forgotten, and who are especially privileged by God.

Now follows the distribution of labor, preceded by a prayer in which God is asked to sanctify each one's task. The abbot gives his blessing, and the period of silence is then considered at an end.¹ But the reading of the necrology at this moment was a custom never omitted. It is most touching and even more significant than the chant of the martyrology. To the Benedictine spirit, labor with prayer is the safest guide on the road to perfection. It seems fitting also that, before engaging in the work assigned to him, each one should turn his thoughts to the departed brothers who with particularly edifying devotion have already claimed their share of the sacred toil.

In the book of the necrology are inscribed the names of the departed, dear to the order, of whom the majority were members of the Bene-

¹ The ancient monastic manuals called the versicle, *Deus in adiutorium meum intende*, which was at this time applied to the distribution of labor, *Versus ad solvendum silentium*.

dictine family, while many were attached to it only through the charity with which they had endowed it, or through the "Confraternity," membership in which endeared them to the order. The reading of these names helps to maintain in the bosom of the large Benedictine family the spirit which permeates it and has been its strength, and which shall be transmitted unaltered and eternally, never to die, like the sacred light of the altar lamp. No lengthy meditation is required to experience the inspiration breathed by these names, and one may understand the feeling of that bishop of the seventh century who named the pages, from which so many memories continue to speak, the "book of life." The reading of the necrology is ended with the recitation by the community of the prayer, *De profundis*, for those who have died on that day.

Newcomers have now entered the chapter-hall. The long beards which fall over their chests recall the patriarchal beard of St. Benedict as it may be seen on so many pictures and medals. These are the lay brothers who now arrange themselves in several lines before the abbot. The acolyte reads a chapter from the Rule, and then the abbot addresses his sons in a speech in

which he paternally sets forth the good effects of holy obedience.²

After the abbot's homily comes the confession of culps. This disciplinary exercise differs from sacramental confession in so far as it has no other object than to admit external faults. It seems natural that, with the state of perfection as the constant goal of his efforts, the Benedictine should not tolerate any fault, and it was St. Benedict's wish that satisfaction should be given for every failure, so that a bad example shown the brothers should never remain unpunished.

This part of the chapter, which is important enough to constitute the chapter properly so called, hardly differs to-day from what it formerly was. The monks of old, however, showed themselves more rigorous than their present brothers and the abbot dealt out punishment with the rod both frequently and generously, in memory of the sage who wrote: "Spare not the rod on thy son, and thou shalt deliver his soul from death."

² In the early monasteries the abbot was not content with a few words. Especially on feast days he would preach entire sermons. We are indebted to this custom for many excellent pieces of eloquence, such as St. Bernard's discourses. To-day a simple conference, held in the afternoon, takes the place of the abbot's homilies.

The abbot used to cry out, just as he does to-day: *Loquamur de ordine nostro*, "Let us speak of our order." At these words the guilty ones would prostrate themselves at full length on the ground. The abbot then continued: *Quid dicitis?*, "What do you have to say?" To this they responded: *Mea culpa*, "My fault." The monks were then designated individually, and each went to confess his fault, first the novices, then the lay brothers, and last the choir-monks. Again prostrated, they awaited their sentence without moving. The abbot determined the gravity of the fault and imposed the punishment, whether fast, special prayers, recitation of a number of psalms, or the rod.

The execution of the last-named punishment took place with ceremonies which did not lack a certain picturesqueness. The monk under sentence sat down wherever he happened to stand, then, lifting up his habit, he placed it on his knees and through the opening in his tunic freed his arms and body down to the cincture. There he sat, shamefaced and with head bent, silent except that he muttered now and then between half-closed lips, *mea culpa*, and, *ego me emendabo*, "my fault," and, "I shall amend myself," which words he would repeat frequently during

the chastisement that ended only at the abbot's order. Then, with the help of a brother, he covered his arms and body in his tunic, remaining still until the abbot should say, *ite sessum*, which may be translated by, "Go and sit down." The penitent then immediately bowed and went back to his place.⁸

Needless to say, the punishment with the rod could not fail to plant fearful visions in the fertile field of the imagination, although many Benedictine annals reassure us by telling us that the procedure was guided by discretion and charity. At all events the usage was much in vogue, and in most monasteries there was a brisk consumption of rods. The vigilance of the brother seedsmen was thus put to constant test for one of their regular duties consisted in providing the chapter with rods of every calibre. The use of this instrument from biblical days however has fallen off considerably in the course of time and it is now entirely abandoned.

The general procedure followed in the confession of culps is that the monk accuses himself in the presence of the abbot and the brothers, kneels down to receive the remonstrances of his

⁸ An inferior was never allowed to strike a superior, but vice versa, or a monk could strike his equal.

superior, accepts his penance, and returns to his place, satisfied in his heart. But it is not always surrounded by cold austerity. Even the sacred character of the place hardly suffices at times to suppress the mild mirth which the confessions could not fail to provoke elsewhere. The chapter has moments of high humor and I am not certain that the shaven faces of the Fathers always remain solemn. The long beards of the lay brothers would prove useful to hide the smiles that often threaten their composure.

In our days the confession of culps is not carried out exclusively in the chapter. In many monasteries it takes place in the refectory at the Friday noon-meal. That is how I came to witness these interesting exercises, and how I happen to be in a position to describe one case that seemed to me particularly pleasant.

At the confession of culps it is customary for the guilty party to carry the *corpus delicti* in his hands, so long as it is not impossible to do so. Faithful to this custom, two brothers knelt down before the abbot one day. One of them was on the verge of falling headlong to the ground and thus committing a graver fault than that of which he was accusing himself. By a clumsy movement he had broken the neck of a vase of

considerable proportions while cleaning the steps of the altar. Without further ado he had come humbly to the refectory, as he would to the chapter, and there, with both arms around the vase, he had knelt down with great difficulty. With a very unsteady movement he asked the pardon which his superior in his wisdom made him wait for without pity. A somewhat awkward brother knelt modestly at his side. His crime was to have broken a candle in two. With eyes closed in order to meditate the better on his fault, he held this candle between his joined hands and failed to see that the upper stem, which formed an angle with the part he clasped, pointed straight towards the abbot and that, so turned, the candle had the appearance of a menacing weapon. While the abbot looked quietly down upon his two unfortunate sons, an almost imperceptible ripple of mirth ran along the benches against the wall. The vision of the rod had grown pale.

When all is said, the confession of culps purifies the heart and soul. The culprit eases the weight of his fault while the rest, more fortunate than he, meditate fruitfully on the effect of the lesson. When the confession is over the monks may begin their day's labor. The Father abbot

then leaves the chapter, the Fathers follow him, and the lay brothers leave last. Each one goes where his duty calls him, and accompanied by the beauty of a hymn the holy task of labor in the bountiful light that has risen over the fields and the monastic buildings begins.

V

THE DAILY LABOR

ACCORDING to a popular prevailing impression, monks do not engage in tiresome labors, and the enclosure is thought to be a shelter for dull idleness rather than a bulwark behind which they work and toil. This impression, like so many others, is not based on a desire for truth, but on the old habit of the human mind to simplify to suit itself questions for whose solution it has no particular aptitude.

The holy founder of the order wrote that laziness is the enemy of the soul, and the least details of the Rule show the care with which he set about to fill his sons' days with systematic and fruitful activity. In the mind of the great Patriarch this activity was necessary not only that each one might merit his privileged place in the Benedictine society, but also that he might grow in spiritual grace.

The purpose of labor is the sanctification of the soul. It humbles pride, purifies the heart and, united with prayer, prepares the mind for

the thought of the divine to whose service it is vowed.

Together with prayer, labor is an essential duty of the Benedictine monk. It shares the hours of the day with prayer, and he who disregards this fundamental principle on the road to perfection makes himself guilty of a kind of sacrilege. "A lazy monk," wrote Dom Maur Wolter, the eminent abbot of Beuron, "puts a blemish on the whole family which has received him, he loads it down with burdens and embarrassment, and he is nothing but a thief and a parasite."¹ Finally, monastic labor is ennobled in that it is an expression of the will's submission to the holy law of obedience.

Considered in this spirit, manual labor cannot be less dignified than that of the intellect and, oftener than the latter, it is capable of enriching a soul by sowing in it the precious virtue of self-denial. The abbot, however, uses good judgment in assigning the various tasks. His choice is guided by each one's capacity as well as by care for his spiritual welfare, and tasks similar to those described by Cassian are assigned only as exceptional trials.

One day, for instance, the abbot of a certain

¹ Dom Maur Wolter, *Vie Monastique*, V., 83.

monastery wanted to test the faithfulness of one of his sons and ordered him to plant a piece of wood in the ground, which he should water daily until it should be covered with flowers. Happy to be able to give proof of his obedience, the monk, without murmuring, hastened to execute this order, and at the end of a year the abbot was obliged to command him to stop this work in order to relieve his unwearying zeal.

No doubt, to a mind closed to the logic of spiritual things, this is a disconcerting example of the working of the system, but it is a marvellous spectacle to the eyes of the mystic that see in a work no usefulness other than that of its final, ideal purpose. This is obedience for obedience's sake or, better stated, an absence of any interest other than the most absolute disinterestedness.² And so it becomes apparent that the lucid parable of Martha and Mary has lost nothing of its troublesome truth.

Formerly, the abbot or the prior distributed the labor in the chapter. When the prayer had

² "If it should happen that a brother is enjoined with difficult or even impossible tasks, he must receive the command given him in all meekness and obedience." *Reg.*, c. lxviii. Thus decrees the holy Patriarch, in order to define the ideal character of obedience in all its rigor.

been recited, he gave to each one the tools belonging to his task, and the brothers would go, in pairs or alone, to the appointed places. They would proceed in silence or singing psalms, some of which were very beautiful as, for example, the one we find indicated in the "Rule of the Virgins," *Sit splendor Domini Dei nostri super nos*, "May the splendor of God, our Lord, shine above us." As a fact, it was an ancient custom to sing during work. Psalms and alleluias would rise from chests panting under the blue sky. This custom already existed in the time of St. Jerome on the fields of Bethlehem and I find the following picturesque exhortations in the Regular Tarnatensis. "The laborer holding the handle of his plow shall chant alleluia; the reaper drenched in sweat shall walk along singing psalms; and while the vine-dresser prunes the back-bent vine-stock with his sickle he shall mumble some of King David's psalms."³

In our days the division of labor follows more liberal rules. Each monk undertakes a task for which his education and his studies have prepared him. Even so, the abbot, with whom authority in this matter rests, intervenes intelli-

³ Quoted by Dom Martène, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

gently and helpfully, more like a father who advises than a master who commands.

When the period of labor is over, the brothers bring back their tools to the prior, who informs himself of what has been accomplished. Then a prayer is recited in order that the work may end, as it has begun, in prayer. The hour is then given over to relaxation and recreation.

The following principle of the division of labor does not concern individual monks, but is sometimes applied to two or more monasteries. "If circumstances should indicate it to him," writes Dom Jean de Hemptinne, "the abbot may permit his monks to take part, at least temporarily, in the labor of another abbey. Sometimes a larger enterprise calls for the coöperation of several monasteries; thus, for example, the building of the university of Salzburg in the XVIIth century and, in our days, the revision of the text of the Vulgate, and missionary or other works, which necessitate large resources in men and money. In such cases a certain number of abbeys, a congregation, or even the whole order, participate in the activity."⁴

⁴ Cf. Dom Jean de Hemptinne, *l'Ordre de Saint Benoît*, Abbaye de Mardesous, 1924, 2e édit. revue.

As we have seen, the labor in the cloister is of two kinds, bodily and mental, which means that very diverse activities combine to make the monastic life fruitful. A Benedictine cloister is a large city, the construction, administration, and life of which are entirely dependent on the monks' initiative. There is not a door or a capital that one of them has not carved, not a table or chair that they have not made, not a tree or flower that is not the direct result of their efforts.

I remember the stirring impression made upon me when I entered an abbey church for the first time. It was in the morning, shortly before the conventual Mass. I walked in silence along the side-ships, glancing at some lay brothers kneeling here and there with their heads thrown back, their eyes ecstatic, and their arms crossed, immovable before the statues of saints, when I heard a humming of psalmody from high up in the vaults.

Immediately I turned my head and caught sight of a monk equipped with pallet and brush, who was perched against the upper wall of the nave in the manner of a plasterer. Like a prayer he hoisted himself up there every morning,

climbed to the vaults and, while entertaining himself with his favorite psalms, traced on the stone great scenes from the Bible, pictures of old patriarchs, the history of Christian worship.

Because it is always anonymous, the work of the monks bears the signature of holiness. The pride of an individual signature is absent, the traces of the artist are blotted out. The work is done in common, its merits are pooled and all talents blended in the supreme humility of effacement.

That morning it struck me with peculiar force that the abbey church had risen through the intelligent power of meditation and fervor. The work which was being done up there by the young artist monk was an act of beauty, flowing naturally from a sense of love. At this very moment all the brothers, each one according to his ability, were performing their work in the same spirit. They would continue at their labor until the clock in the tower should strike, marking the hour for prayer which would draw new reserve for the labors to come.

The mystic bee-hive is ever busy. It draws all its resources from its own activities. It is an ideal phalanstery, a synthesis of human func-

tioning in continual growth toward perfection. As I mused over this, I thought with still greater sadness of the barbarous picture that the popular mind draws of these busy cities.⁵

Under the searching inquiries of historical critique the alleged obscurantism of the Middle Ages, charged as a crime against the monks, vanishes from day to day in the smoke of legend. It seems a matter beyond argument that a thorough examination into the social activity of the monasteries of that epoch would add to the history of civilization one of its most important chapters.

What names arise spontaneously in the mind! Monte Cassino, Cava, and Farfa in Italy, Cluny, Cîteaux, Saint-Maur, and Solesmes in France, Fulda and Ratisbon in Germany, St. Gall and Einsiedeln in Switzerland, Westminster in England, Montserrat in Spain, and so many others, all living lights and active centers where the seed was sown for the richest harvests of earth, the

⁵ D. G. Morin writes in his *L'Idéal monastique et la Vie chrétienne des premiers jours*, Mardesous, 1921, p. 78, as follows: "It is not difficult to answer that the usefulness of a Benedictine abbey is more evident than ever, that this mission is to represent before the people, in a strongly concentrated form, all that is scattered in the great Church of God, all the elements of light and heat, of force and tenderness, of virtue and grandeur, of intensity in spiritual life within, as well as of its charity and irresistible influence without."

delights of the heart, the fruit of the mind, and the treasures of learning.⁶

What work have they accomplished? In teaching agriculture to the poor, in preserving and transcribing manuscripts for coming generations, and gathering together a whole anthology of art in all its domains, they have left a patrimony which will easily bear comparison with the noblest. Even to-day one marvels at the beauty of the monastic organization. Far from excluding the influences of modern civilization, the monks have welcomed all aids to their progress, but they have kept close to their hearts the necessity of preserving one thing which seems lost to modern civilization, pitilessly ruined in the course of the ages, the spiritual decorum that beautifies creation and elevates the soul.

This spiritual decorum also softens the rigor of labor. One need but cross the threshold of a cloister and mingle for a few days in the daily life within to feel from minute to minute the all-enveloping friendly harmony, a veritable music of the Lord that enchants the soul and strength-

⁶ In this connection one may read to advantage the book by Dom Usmer Berlière, O. S. B., *L'Ordre monastique des origines au XIIIe siècle*, Mardesous, 1912, and particularly the chapter entitled "l'Œuvre civilisatrice." See also H. Taine, *Origines de la France contemporaine, l'Ancien régime*, t. I, pp. 6-7.

ens the spirit, a music, whose mystic power cannot be grasped by the uninitiated mind, but whose ecstasy is ever present to the sensitive heart.

Moreover, the music of the cloister carries on its wings something more and something better than purely esthetic raptures. How, otherwise, could it exert the manifold power which is the spirit of its beauty? It breathes the spirit of brotherhood without which no society can long exist, and also the spirit of love without which there is no Christian life.

While a certain division of labor is practiced in the monastery, separation into classes is unknown there. Communism is not there an empty word, but a living idea and an actual fact. While the manual labor is for the most part assigned to the lay brothers, yet whatever differentiation in tasks exists arises from nature and not from worldliness. Obedience makes all tasks equal, and the spirit in which they are performed gives them their merit and true value.

In order to give practical demonstration of this principle it often happens that the Father abbot commands one of his sons to leave one task and to take up quite a different one. A monk once told me that this custom is in vogue

in most Benedictine monasteries, and that the abbot puts it in practice once a year, on a day not previously determined. Might not such a test be a source of confusion and vexation? One may imagine the sad resignation with which a Father, who for months had been occupied with some artistic task, abandons his favorite work in order, perhaps, to take charge as Father cook.

The abbot, however, acts with judgment, thoughtfulness, and kindness. The order which he gives must be executed without delay and, more important still, cheerfully. By his cheerful submission is measured the quality of a monk's vocation and the endurance of his faith. The spontaneity of his obedience proves that he has not lost sight of the significance of labor, and that the result he seeks is not to create a perishable masterpiece, but to make progress towards the state of perfection, which he cannot do without humility and renunciation.

Thus are the monks called upon to perform all the duties implied in the life of the cloister. In the early days, manual was of far greater importance than intellectual labor. Prayer alone sufficed for all mental and spiritual needs, and a great many brothers were unable even to write. In the course of time the spirit of study grew in

the cloisters, and towards the eleventh century it was found advisable to divide the monks into two groups, according to their abilities. The brothers who were educated and invested with holy orders became choir-monks, while the more lowly ones, who had come from the countryside to find a refuge for discipline and prayer in the shadow of the abbey, received the name of lay brothers.

The latter took simple vows only, from which at any time the abbot could relieve them by his own authority. They took no part whatever in the administrative activity of the house and were not invested with the various insignia of the priest. These two groups, which constitute the essential element of monastic society, still exist to-day in brotherly comradeship, and they, too, contribute to perpetuate the parable of Martha and Mary.

The impression produced on me by these good lay brothers was tinged with a measure of fear when for the first time I saw their long beards, their bushy eyebrows and their robust physique, but the mildness of their eyes was enough to show me what sweet kindness their prayers had gathered in their hearts. The up-keep of the kitchen-garden, the tilling of the vineyard and the fields,

the pleasant harvest work and that of the hay-making season, which they shared with the novices, the locksmith's work, and various tasks in the service of the monastery, all these things represent their share of the labor.

Labors of a different kind were reserved for the choir-monks even while it was still possible to assign them to any brother without distinction, according to the wishes of the abbot. Paleography, hagiography, patrology, philology, history and above all, the history of art, were the domains in which their investigations were carried on. Without fear of contradiction it may be said that learning owes its most precious discoveries to the virtue of obedience, which is the very soul of monastic labor, and in this kind of research work, efforts comparable to those of the Benedictines can be found only in that remarkable development of modern research that had contemporary Germany for its cradle. Apart from this, the monument in honor of religious beauty which they have raised and preserved should stimulate every cultivated mind to recognition of their sacred task. Elsewhere I shall speak of their great solicitude for beauty to which they turned as a relief from lesser cares, but I wish from the beginning to remind my readers of

the fact that the cultivation of beauty constitutes one of their essential aims.

Ever since its discovery, printing has been diligently practiced in the Benedictine monasteries. With rare discrimination as to the relative value of progress and tradition, the monks transcribed ancient manuscripts and painted illuminations and miniatures on vellum and these works, which delight us in faded missals and old antiphonaries, now form their special treasure.

The service of beauty is a pure Benedictine tradition. In our days the monks continue to add to this treasure and they feel it as much their duty to develop in their art-schools the sense of pure beauty as to teach the men in the fields to clear the ground. Painting, sculpture, architecture, numismatology, sacred music—every age sees these branches flourish anew from an ever young and strong sap. Who has not tarried before the pictures, simple and severe in line, at Mardesous and Monte Cassino, where the congregation of Beuron has revived the spirit of the primitive fresco? Who has not felt himself swept as by a fresh spring breeze when he has heard the *Cantique Mariales*, written in the manner of the ancient Gregorian melodies by the learned Dom Pothier?

Another activity, held in great esteem in the monasteries now as in the past, is the reading of books, always a fertile source of meditation and a nourishing food for the soul. Second only to the relics, the books of the cloister are accounted its most sacred treasures. An old saying has it that a cloister without books is like a camp without an arsenal—*claustrum sine armario quasi castrum sine armamentario*. The brothers used to engage in this pious occupation in the quiet of their cells, in the chapter hall, and sometimes in the refectory. They were obliged to give the reading their full attention, because they were called upon later to show the abbot in detailed commentaries what profit they had derived from it for their spiritual life. If the examination was not successful the brother had to begin the reading anew, and while without murmuring he read again the pages which he had gone over with insufficient attention, the eyes of the monk who made the rounds rested upon him, watching to see that his eyes did not close in sleep or in reverie under the lowered cowl.

To-day the monks who made the rounds are dead and, at the most, the superior's eyes venture to the wicket of a cell. Nevertheless, the eye of God living in the heart of the monk is

the great eye that never closes. It is God who sanctifies the task, who during hours of fatigue softens the hard test of obedience. His loving eye makes all things bright. It is the sun of the fields towards which the voices of the lay brothers rise, that kind light in which the Father warms his soul, when in the early morning he sweeps his cell or cleans his boots. It was in order to be nourished by Him that the sons of St. Benedict accomplished the magnificent works to which our civilization is, alas, the ungrateful heir.

Nevertheless, the example of the monks in labor, in the cultivation of beauty and in the practice of obedience, remains always what it has been. Is it not to our detriment that we do not understand it, men of our age, who, while we see in labor but the satisfaction of our physical needs, are not aware of the star above, shedding its ray of light, the hard but brilliant star of duty?

VI

CONVENTUAL MASS. TERCE AND SEXT

IN the ancient monasteries custom prescribed that Mass should not be celebrated except on Sundays and on great feast-days. It was not long, however, before this sacred office was repeated, first two or three times a week, then daily and even oftener; in the days of Charlemagne they did not hesitate in some Benedictine monasteries to chant as many as three solemn Masses daily, from daybreak to noon.

The monks have been at work steadily since the hour of Prime. Whether manual or mental, the task imposed by their superior has kept them busy until the moment when the great bell has called them to the holy Sacrifice. Then each one has left his work without delay and gone to the church. By virtue of its particular significance and beauty, the office which is about to begin stands apart from the rest, and under no pretext may any one absent himself from it. This hour is one during which the community, united by devout memories and elevated by a common

inspiration, will feel an actual crystallization of its ideal in the splendor of the symbols and the magnificence of the liturgy.

Scarcely have the monks reached their stalls, dressed in their cowls and long choir mantles, when the celebrant enters, preceded by the acolytes, the thurifer, the master of ceremonies, and the deacon and sub-deacon. He ascends the steps of the altar towards the epistle side while, at a sign from the abbot, the brothers intone the first psalms of Terce.

Visions strongly emotional in their appeal are called up by the short office of Terce, which with Sext and None constitutes the "little hours," so called although their significance is unequaled, because Terce is the hour when Jesus was condemned, Sext the hour when He was nailed to the cross, and None the hour of His death. Naturally dear to Christians, these "little hours" were commemorated by the earliest monks, who were agitated by the failure of the liturgy to give them the place to which they were entitled. And so, from the sixth century on, Mass was preceded by Terce and followed by Sext, the two "little hours" thus wrapping themselves like garlands of sad memories and holy examples around the divine Sacrifice.

During the psalmody of Terce and to the imploring notes of St. Ambrose's hymn, the abbot prepares to officiate. It would be difficult to describe adequately the splendor of the sacerdotal vestments in which his assistants robe him. The amice or linen cloth which covers his neck symbolizes grace, the white alb hangs down to his feet, covering his body as a robe of purity, and the cincture, a sign of continence, encircles his waist. Then comes the stole, a pledge of immortality, and the chasuble, which goes over the other vestments, and whose Latin name, *casula*, signifies a "little house," a tabernacle of Christ, as is indicated by the cross designed upon it, a tabernacle into which the priest retires during the Sacrifice as into a sanctuary. Finally he receives the insignia of pastoral virtue and of sacred authority, the crozier in his hand and the mitre on his head. Thus vested in sacred splendor and visible symbols, the abbot bows to the assistants and walks towards the altar.

Those prayers of Mass in which the soul humbles itself are now recited on the altar-steps before the crucifix, while the choir chants the *Introit* and the *Kyrie eleison*, the supplication which like a cry for pity and an appeal for mercy

is repeated three times to each of the Persons in the holy Trinity.

Then follows the incensing of the altar. The celebrant causes the fragrant clouds from the censer to arise towards the crucifix just as, long ago, the Magi offered frankincense and myrrh to the Babe of Bethlehem. The first incensing at the *Introit* of the sacred stone, which symbolizes the body of Christ, the clouds ascending heavenward with the words of the ritual, what is it but a perpetuation of the vision of the beloved Apostle, St. John, at Patmos? Did he not see, beyond the firmament, the angels of the Lord swinging golden censers at the feet of the Lamb? The incense has retained its symbolism of ecstasy and prayer. At the Offertory its fragrance penetrates the offerings on the altar as if to render them agreeable to God, winds itself lovingly around the sorrowfully outstretched arms of the Crucified, and lingers like a mist on the leaves of the Gospel in the book of life and truth. It envelops the priest, the choir, and the faithful, all and everything, in its aura of sanctification and adoration of the Lord.

Now a jubilant chant bursts forth. It is the old hymn *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, which was chanted in the primitive Church and with fitting

propriety was called the angelic hymn or the canticle of the angels. While the words of joy whirl above the choir before ascending towards the vaults, the priest, standing before the middle of the altar, lifts his hands towards heaven and then joins them in a gesture of love. He bows his head at the words *adoramus te—gratias agimus tibi*—"we adore Thee—we give Thee thanks." The fervor of the chant triumphs over every earthly thought.

In this, as in so many other hymns, the chant prolongs the words, enhancing their meaning and suggestion, lending them a subtler echo, a transforming power which penetrates the heart. The *Gloria*, the joyous invocation of Jesus, sent up towards the heavenly realms far back in the Apostolic ages, still expresses the happiness of faith and the rapture of love. The words of the Apostles follow this outcry of human hope. The Epistle is read, as were the sacred lessons in the ancient Jewish synagogue. The sub-deacon mounts the steps of the ambo and reads the text which usually is taken from the writings of St. Paul. Then comes the Gradual and the *Alleluia*, the ancient Gregorian chant displaying its beautiful complexities and its tender rhythms.

During the chant of the Gradual, the person-

nel of the altar arrange themselves preparatory to the procession, which then moves on towards the abbot.¹ The sub-deacon carries the elaborate cushion on which he receives the Gospel-book. The choir bow before the sacred book while the abbot traces the sign of the cross over their heads. The book is then opened on the ambo, and the divine word rises in slow rhythm, while the wax candles pierce with their trembling flame the fragrant white clouds of incense with which the sacred pages have just been scattered. The master of ceremonies stands near by, carefully watching the book and by his posture recalling the words of St. Chrysostom: "Let no one touch it, unless it be with trembling and fear, which a strong sense of piety and reverence inspire."

Of all liturgical books, the Gospel-book is the special object of a unique reverence, because it is the book of the eternal word. Its exterior is enriched with beautiful ornamentation, and its covers are often encrusted with ivory, gems, and precious metals. It is carried triumphantly in processions, and it is the only book which is kissed by the abbot and the celebrant, incensed, and blessed with the sign of the cross. When

¹ When he assists or officiates at the conventual Mass.

the Greeks buried their priests, the Gospel-book was placed beside the hand which had opened it so many times.

When the Gospel has been chanted the choir responds with *Laus tibi Christe*, "Praise be to Thee, O Christ," immediately after which the beautiful prose of the *Credo* is intoned, the splendid and magnificent symbol of the Faith which, during the first centuries, was never used at Mass. The *Credo*, omitted by the Church at Masses for the dead, at the feast of St. John the Baptist and many other feasts, is the foremost musical expression of the Christian spirit. It has its origin in the formula in use in the Church of Jerusalem and in a fusion of the symbols of Nicæa and Constantinople, and is more complete than the Apostles' Creed and that of St. Athanasius, which latter is recited only at the hour of Prime on Sundays. Thus it emerges from the mysterious past of the first centuries, in whose oriental atmosphere the most consoling mysticism flourished, carried on the wings of fervent lyrics. The history of the past, all the hopes and all the promises of the hereafter, are exalted in its text in which the endless communion of the ages dreams, and when the person of Jesus appears in the halo of His

redemption, the human heart cannot fail to tremble in the midst of the silence into which fall the sorrowful but salutary words, *et Homo factus est*.

Lifted to the heights of devotion, the soul reaches without effort the three stages of sacrifice—oblation, consecration, and communion. What heavenly shelter do not the monasteries reserve for our moments of turmoil, with the spiritual beauty, the eternal drama and the profound significance of the Christian life all gathered together there!

When the last Gospel has been read, the choir immediately intones the psalms of Sext and chants the hymn in which St. Ambrose, while exalting the power of God, beseeches Him to extinguish in us the spirit of discord and passion.

The brothers now leave the stalls. Falling into two long lines, and after a last genuflection towards the altar, they disappear silently through the side door and resume their labor until the hour for rest.

One who has not assisted at a conventual Mass, who has not known the mystical atmosphere of its lights, its chant, and its splendor, cannot imagine the heights which spiritual worship may reach in its most sumptuous expres-

sion. One's whole being is captivated—the intellect, however weak its sense for liturgy; the soul, if it retains but an inkling of the unlimited joys of mysticism; the heart that does not deny itself to the most human symbol of love that was ever conceived; and the emotions with their capacity to love, to commune, to tremble before this symphony built up through the centuries, whose elements are Gregorian music, great paintings and sculpture, sacred vestments, the shadows about the old Roman arches, and the blaze of light on the altar that throws its halo over the mystery of the Gothic vaults. It is an enchantment of soul and senses, purified by the spirit from on high, in which the human heart awakens to beauty.

What a strange spectacle this magnificence presents in the house of the God of the lowly, the monastery church, where their virtue is exalted every hour who have vowed themselves to holy poverty. Nevertheless, this luxury so eagerly displayed in the Benedictine offices, and which J. K. Huysmans so fittingly calls “the luxury for God,” is only an appearance, and in later pages its true meaning will be made manifest.

It was a conventual Mass, at which I assisted on Easter day in one of the richest abbey

churches of the order, that made me understand the force with which liturgical richness at times makes itself felt as the mouthpiece of faith and of the audible word of God. The choir, turning in deep devotion towards the altar, joined in the prayers of the Mass, guided by the movements of the celebrant. When the little bell was rung for the elevation, the arms of the crucifix rose tense and stiff; only to relax again in the purifying flames of the resurrection.

Each one withdraws into inner ecstasy, there to contemplate his own dazzling visions of faith. There dreams, desires and resolves enter and are given welcome. All else, all that during these moments does not contribute to spiritual ecstasy is effaced. The candle-flame purges the soul, melts the golden objects on the altar, and consumes the stones in its conflagration. There is not a sound, not a word, not a movement by the celebrant, the choir, or the acolytes, that is not harmonized in waves of music. The fragrance of the incense, the modulations of the chant, the rapture and the visions, transform the altar into a part of heaven, in which the fervently devoted soul delights.

Thus the world is snatched away from before the eyes of the monks, and they need not resort

to practices of self-denial to achieve the same end. They yield, they deliver themselves to the spirit which carries them away, and they know that its yoke is sweet.

Still a few moments, and a silence falls which seems suddenly to empty the nave; it is the kneeling at the *Sanctus*. Life prostrates itself. The tower clock proclaims in deep and intermittent tones that the transubstantiation is taking place on the altar. The abyss of eternity opens wide over the creature. But soon a new note calls him to himself. As if enraptured, the soul frolics timidly on reopened wings in the sweet supplication of the *Agnus Dei*. While the slow accents rise towards heaven, the priest gives the deacon the kiss of peace, and the latter in his turn gives it to the sub-deacon, who carries it first to the abbot and then to the brothers, as a message from Christ. It is a message of pure love which twenty centuries have conveyed around the world, from lip to lip, unfailingly, in a long, continuous gesture. How many ills have vanished under this kiss, how many resentments, how many hidden wants—the whole pitiful host of our secret miseries! The monks know this, for by the close contacts of community life they are tried more profoundly than most others.

VII

A BENEDICTINE CELL

THESE is one moment in the flowering experience of youth that remains particularly dear to us. I refer to that moment when the mind, stirred by some mighty stimulus, sees a vision of the marvelous horizons opened up to us by its own activity. It is then that the realization of the spiritual world dawns upon us, and we yearn to withdraw from the physical world in order to retreat into the vast universe of the spirit and to abandon ourselves wholly to its influence. Every aid should be sought to help us in the achievement of this high purpose and the monastery is the most fitting spot in which to pursue our quest for the attainment of peace.

There is a short Latin name for this abode of spiritual peace. The monks have retained this short name, *cella*—which in English has become “cell”—to designate the room in which their work is done, their prayers consecrated and their meditation pursued. These four walls which isolate the cell from outside influences form an

embodiment of the mature ideal growing out of the youthful one. The very air and light are part of the spirit of the place. Just as Malebranche darkened the windows in his room in order the better to follow his own ideas, so the religious shelter themselves in their cells and meditate within the enclosure of silence, where the clear image of heaven becomes more distinct each day.

Already the anchorites in the desert built lowly hermitages between themselves and the outside world, and if the great St. Benedict established the community dormitory as more appropriate to the monastic ideal, it was not long before his sons began to show preference for the individual cell, thus proving themselves in agreement with the words of St. Bernard who said that "it is in the solitude that the priest perfects himself."

Before we reach our final destination, is not this solitary little corner the very home of our choice, the hearth where the enraptured soul may gather some rays of the divine essence? Is it not the goal to which the long procession of the saints and blessed have come, to find forgetfulness of the world in the trembling of the first rays from the beyond?

Indeed, the monk has a very partial love for it, and the love which unites him to God is proportionate to the strength of his attachment to his cell. Is it not possible, then, for human passions to affect him in this seclusion? No, he is prey to nothing but that Nirvana in which his reveries would destroy him, against which the mystics have fought, and obedience to the Rule will prevent. Within the small space inclosing him, the monk cultivates patiently the live flowers of his soul. There he fosters them with the same care which he displays in the liturgical exercises. The cell is another oratory, a mystic garden, in which his heart is stirred under the eyes of the Bridegroom alone.

The entrance door to the cell opens from a long cloister which, in turn, looks out upon the ever tranquil court, undisturbed by the least noise, serene as the threshold of heaven. In memory of the community dormitory in which the first sons of St. Benedict used to sleep, the wing of the convent which houses the cells is called the *Dormitorium*. Two different names are to be read above each door, that of the religious who lives within, and that of the saint who is his guardian. Silence, more complete

than in any other part of the cloister, reigns supreme here.

A guest going through the *Dormitorium* may visit only two cells, those of the abbot and the prior. He can cast only a furtive glance into any other whose door happens to be open. What he sees then is a simple bed, covered with a drugget, a prie-Dieu, a table, a desk, and two chairs. The decorations are scarcely richer than the furniture. There is a crucifix, a picture of the Blessed Virgin and another of St. Benedict, sometimes an engraving which betrays the inspiration of Beuron in its lines. Finally there is a small font on the door, always filled with holy water with which the religious blesses himself each time he passes the threshold.¹

In the first rays of early morning the cell presents to one fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of it an aspect of bright cheerfulness. The sun steals in through the window, and the nakedness of the walls is clothed in white purity, from which a sweet manna of the spirit seems to fall. The monk who shuts himself within it in the fervor of his soul, sees a mirage of eternal

¹ Two acolytes have for duty to renew the holy water in these fonts each Sunday morning. On this occasion they pronounce the words, *Ecce aqua benedicta*—"See the holy water"—to which the monk responds, *Sit mihi salus et vita*—"May it be unto me salvation and life."

realities, whose liturgy impregnates, incenses, and enraptures him.

Between these four walls he works diligently on that small table, where one feels the constant presence of the spirit of the Father. To work in the cell is to work in God. Heavy tasks become easy there, and without difficulty one may picture to oneself the long patience of the Benedictines, furrowing fields of thought across the centuries in fertile ground. One sees them triumph where the obstacles appeared insurmountable, and one may grasp what intellectual harvests have been gathered from this labor.

Early in the morning, after Matins, the monk, be he now philosopher, historian or liturgist, installs himself in this cell and, with the exception of the periods for office, in the refectory, or in recreation, it is there that his activities run their course in sacred hours of labor, alternating only with meditation on God. From the first rays of dawn until twilight, his mind has no other care than that of scientific research and systematic prayer, aiming towards a supreme union with the Creator. However the soul may become inured to the trials which in the beginning of cloistered life tormented it, in this divine retreat, flooded with love and silence, does it not

find singularly easy access to the peace which pours its sap into every fiber of his being?

Especially in our days when the community dormitory is no more in existence, the isolation of the cell produces its full effect of calm and spiritual joy. No doubt it was touching to see, in days of old, the lowly couches of the young brothers standing between the beds of their elders, the Fathers. By making the necessary division of the ancient *Dormitorium* into individual cells, however, times and customs seem to have regarded progress rather than greater comfort in the sacred institutions.² Moreover, the duty of surveillance which the abbot did not wish to abandon was not made more difficult by this change. The *visitura* or small wicket in the door of each cell, with its movable slide which the superior could push back whenever he so desired, remains the symbol of this duty. For the benefit of the uninitiated whom this detail may shock I hasten to add that this *visitura* is

² Since the sixteenth century, partitions between the beds had been considered in certain convent-schools. Benedict XII forbade them in the constitution which had for aim to reform the Benedictine order. He wanted to reëstablish the community dormitory in its full integrity, but intellectual progress and the obstructing exigencies of the work to which the Fathers devoted themselves made it necessary to divide the dormitory into cells. This division was adopted in the fifteenth century by the congregation of Sainte-Justine, and it may be said to have been definitely put in practice in the seventeenth century.

hardly ever put in use. The abbots have too much feeling for what is due individual dignity and self-respect to put an eye, which some may think indiscreet, to the symbolical wicket. If nevertheless they ventured to do so at times, they were governed by reasons to whose excellence one must submit. Let us also bear in mind that the abbot, when he glances into the cell, does so in his purely spiritual capacity. The abbot is no more than an intermediary of the Lord whose place he takes, and who watches over the cells and sounds the heart of the monks constantly.

If the cell appears to us—and with justice—an admirable retreat for work, it is no less important for the cultivation of the spiritual life. It is the little temple whose key the monk has thrown away, the oratory where the heart labors in its ascent towards heavenly realities. The last surge of the world dies on its consecrated threshold. Within, there is place for flights unknown to the world. From on high, the Father's eye scrutinizes the conscience and lets his grace descend silently. Strong and tender, the divine voice speaks in the heart. The cell is filled with an overflowing of the spirit. When after the reproaches of conscience the soul has made

amends and purified itself, it hears whispers which intoxicate it with a fervor unknown to human love. Thus, night and day, the monk's temple becomes the temple of God, in which the union of the human with the divine love grows into a sweetly impassioned intimacy. What a solitude is this, in which the Bridegroom becomes the center, the motive force, and the very soul! In his heart the monk is assured of this real presence, before whose glory all the rigor of the discipline he has undergone becomes as nothing, and his tower of faith and strength against which worldly forces beat in vain, is built anew. Who would not, if he could, draw the very substance of his energy from the deep sources of so great a love? Who would deny that the cultivation of this mystic love is incomparably stronger for its being a pure love, nay, more, the very purity of love?

It is in the cell that the virtues of prayer and of labor are perfected. It is from this *prie-Dieu* and from this simple table that they draw their strength, become ever more completely realized, and known more intimately. When night has fallen and the curfew sounded and the monk has stretched himself upon his bed, he feels against

his heart the hand which touched St. Augustine, his ancestor, and when he closes his eyes in sleep he carries back of them the inner vision over which the star of Bethlehem keeps constant watch.

If one lacks imagination to picture these things, one needs but to have spent a few hours in a guest cell in order to understand them and, better still, to experience them. I cannot close this description without recalling to mind a monk's cell which I entered one day by special favor. Indeed, it was no adherence to extreme simplicity that I had to admire here, but an equally simple Christian virtue, however lavishly expressed.

The very large cell received abundant light through its bay-window. Here and there on the walls were to be seen pictures of saints, but these did not present the modest appearance of ordinary engravings, nor even the elegant simplicity of the Beuron lines. Hung in rich frames, they were nothing less than old canvases by masters, magnificent witnesses to the faith which ruled in this place. The Christ of one of them, with His ascetic and brotherly expression, was intensely alive, and on closer examination this expression

was also to be seen on the very face of the monk, who sat bending over the table, busied with his task.

Kin to the old canvases were the old books that were at the service of the monk's keen, devouring intellect, and in which his attention was now absorbed. If the physiognomy ever reveals the true essence of the personality, then the somewhat frigid flame of the eyes behind the spectacles denoted the born scholar. Through his thin lips the breath flowed meagerly into his lungs, and his expression betrayed a disciplined sensitiveness. The biretta of black velvet, resting on his generously tonsured head after the fashion of Wagner in the portrait painted by Lenbach, enhanced the rare comeliness of his features.

Perhaps I did not see before me a pattern of perfect simplicity, yet, cannot simplicity be made manifest in exceptional beauty when it is resolved into its essence of pure spirituality? An aura which I must call sumptuous certainly radiated from his cell. The cult of the "luxury for God" perpetuated itself there, but I was convinced myself that here was no infringement of the Rule. I liked this splendor, suggestive of the altar, which gave witness to the fact that

labor as well as prayer—and it is not far from being itself true prayer—retains the privilege of drawing energy unto itself in an atmosphere where everything praises God magnificently. No doubt, the thought of the naked cell of St. Jerome at first befuddled my impressions. The conviction soon came, however, that appearances vanish before oneness in thought and in spirit. The same thought and the same spirit dwelt here as in the barren cell of St. Jerome.

The monk whom I thus had the fortune to approach was one of the most remarkable savants of the order and one of the foremost in the esteem of the world of learning. Such learning and such ascetic purity assumed in my eyes the proportions of an inestimable revelation. The minutes I spent in this cell seemed to me to be touched by the light of eternity; it was as though I communed with the absolute power of the Spirit.

From these short moments I retain the distinct feeling that a phenomenon of the noblest character was in process under the apparent immobility of the monk and his surroundings. From day to day the faculties of the soul expanded.

The monk's cell, which is measured by so

many according to the measure of their mentality, often more poverty-stricken than a cell could ever be, from the conception of which so many ignorant minds turn as from a tomb, this cell is nothing short of a cradle and a hearth of inspiration. To one who can listen and understand, the serene rhythm issuing therefrom speaks of that kind of life which alone is worthy to be dignified with the name of life. If only I dared I would write above his closed door these words: *Silentio, labori et orationi sacrum*—"Consecrated to silence, labor, and prayer."

VIII

THE REFECTORY

WHEN the meal-hours approach, a bright gayety invades the cloisters. Before the bell has summoned the brothers, they leave their occupations and walk down from all sides towards the refectory in order to be gathered there when the abbot arrives. The Angelus rings and they kneel down. His task accomplished, each one joins in with a contented spirit and a light heart. At the evening hour as well as at noon, the faces are lit with an expression of peace, which gives them at times a look of exquisitely tender youth. I remember the astonishment I felt the first time I became aware of this.

In the early days, the prior would ring a bell, and the brothers would then immediately go to the choir; whence they marched in procession to the refectory. Some, indeed, now make a visit to the oratory before the meal, but this they do by their own choice. They then go to the *lavabo* and remain there a moment in memory of St. Pachomius who especially recommended this

custom. It is no rare sight to behold the abbot standing at the font, and in a brotherly manner presenting a towel to some guest he may have received into his abbey.

The silent entry of the community into the refectory is most impressive to one who is a stranger in a monastery. As for me, I was very much moved on that day when a monk, a friend of mine, took me with him through the empty and resounding cloisters at the noon-hour, and when I suddenly found myself in the presence of the abbot I instinctively bowed low to kiss the ring on the hand which he held out to me. I know no gesture of welcome which in simple grandeur equals this outstretched hand. One must appreciate its reserve, from which a certain aloofness is not always excluded. But this aloofness in which the spirit of tradition lives and rules, is without disdain and quite friendly, and it gives to charity an air of princely graciousness.¹

¹ The guest who kisses the abbot's ring does not follow a precept or an exigency of interior discipline, but performs this act purely in a spirit of deference. Some abbots like to perpetuate this gesture. How many more would not like to omit it! In this connection I feel remorse when I think of the trouble I caused a very lovable abbot when one day I visited a Bavarian monastery. Quite embarrassed, he withdrew his hand when I wanted to kiss the ring on it, and I could feel that his humility was mixed with a doubt as to whether he should not sacrifice it to tradition.

The brothers no longer wait for the abbot to enter, as they did formerly, before crossing the threshold. After having blessed himself with holy water which is offered him at the door, each one bows to the cross above the abbot's seat, goes to his table, and remains standing before it with his cowl drawn and his hands under the scapular. The abbot's arrival is greeted with a bow of the head. He places himself at a table standing towards the east. Like his brothers he remains standing, and when the silence has become complete he speaks the word *Benedicite*, which all repeat, together with a prayer. The chanter then intones the versicle *Oculi omnium*, or *Edent pauperi*, depending upon whether or not it is a fast-day. After that the abbot blesses the gathering, the table, and the food and all sit down.²

In the meantime a brother comes up and kneels at the abbot's table; he is the reader who asks for a special blessing. At a sign from the abbot he rises again and goes back to his chair which usually stands in the middle of the refec-

² An ancient rule prescribed that at this moment a basket with bread, hanging on a cord, should be lowered onto the abbot's table by means of a pulley system. The abbot then blessed the bread which symbolized the manna fallen from heaven. Let us hasten to add that this prescription was never observed.

tory. Then the reading begins, but not so the meal, because before the body receives any food it is fitting that the soul should be strengthened and kept alert by spiritual nourishment. In the most complete silence all listen to the verses of Scripture with which the reading always begins,³ and not until the moment when the abbot gives a signal by rapping on the table do they touch the dishes which are set before them.⁴

This silent meal of the monks is not gloomy and lifeless. When he has overcome his first feeling of astonishment and embarrassment, the guest immediately finds interest in the mimicry which goes on around him. If the spoken language is forbidden in the refectory, that of gesture becomes the more eloquent, and one notices it more than anywhere else in countries where

³ In chapter xxxviii of the *Reg. S. Bened.* one reads: *Summumque fit silentium ad mensam, ut nullius mussitatio vel vox, nisi solius legentis, ibi audiatur*—"the most complete silence shall rule at the table, so that no one's whispering or voice, except that of the reader, may be heard there."

⁴ At Cluny, the priest who had celebrated Mass distributed hosts to those who had not communicated, and this was done before the food could be touched. It goes without saying that these hosts were not consecrated, but were so-called eulogies, blessed on the altar. As a fact, Udalric wrote: "On certain days, hosts, which are not consecrated, are taken to the refectory to be distributed by the hands of the priest to those who have not communicated that day. . . . First to the Father abbot, then to those at the tables, those who receive it kissing the hand of the priest." Cf. Martène, *Op. cit.*, p. 90. Du Cange reports that this Clunian custom is long since abandoned.

the climate creates special exigencies of the stomach. Indeed, what need is there for talk in the refectory of a monastery, except to call for some food, some beverage, or some table utensil? In the meantime, would there not be a certain impropriety in the formulation of vulgar thoughts which the observation of perfect silence avoids? It cannot be doubted that the wisdom of this practice governs the conduct of many monks. But in some countries that I have in mind the virtue of self-denial does extend to the region of the stomach. In Germany I have noticed impatient gestures and beseeching if not greedy eyes, not because the portions were too modest, but because the appetites proved too robust, especially in those parts where the mountain winds act upon them as a never failing stimulant.

This silent language, moreover, seemed so natural that in ages past some monasteries used exact signs in which each need found its precise expression. I hasten to add that this usage gave rise to no abuse, and that a strict discipline was observed during meals in these monasteries. Thus it came about that St. Dorotheus, solicitous for the demands of decorum, wrote that "thou shalt not stretch out thy hand impru-

dently and irreligiously to take the food which has been placed before thy brother.”

From the moment when the abbot gives the signal, the servers are busy with their tasks. Each one dons a white apron. Most of them are clerics, and they are directed by a Father.⁵ The superior's table is served first,⁶ then those of the brothers, and all in complete silence. The servers are careful not to disturb the silence with any noise, and to make doubly sure, they dress their feet in heavy socks. On the other hand, they do not take their eyes from the tables. They see to it that nothing is lacking to the brothers who, thanks to so great solicitude, often find themselves relieved even of the effort of a gesture.

Nevertheless, before tasting of a single dish, each one must make sure that his neighbor is properly provided and also be ready, in contrary case, to turn over to him from his own service what he lacks, and if he does not have what his

⁵ The brothers must serve in turn at table, without exception. The prior himself is not exempt from this duty. Each serves for a week, having first received the abbot's blessing. Cf. *Reg. S. Bened.* c. xxxv.

⁶ In some monasteries the youngest are served first. This was the custom in most ancient monasteries, and if not practiced throughout the service, it was followed for certain dishes. At Cluny, for example—it is Udalric who informs us—if the beans had been served first at the abbot's table, the other vegetables were distributed beginning with the youngest monks.

brother needs, to give signs to the servers until satisfaction has been obtained. This politeness and this zeal of all for each become the more pleasing because they are practiced in the monasteries with the simple spontaneity of a habit. It is only one of the expressions of kind and true Christian charity which may be observed there.

The material aspect of the meals, as one may well imagine, is made the object of strict regulations, and the Rule expressly devotes two chapters to it. Contrary to the opinion of many outsiders on things monastic, the Benedictine cloisters, in common with many others, give their children very substantial nourishment. The original austerity—and is this not another sign of wisdom?—has gradually been modified. St. Hilary, who during his long life ate nothing but beans steeped in cold water, is now hardly more than a fading memory. Abstinence, however, is not forbidden those who think they should practice it for the cultivation of their spiritual well-being, and the periods of fast recur often enough to give them satisfaction.

St. Benedict himself was hardly a rigorist on this point. Although he prescribed a certain ration in food and drink, he did not forget that differences in human nature or, rather, to use

the words of the Rule, "the infirmity of temperaments," create a disproportion in individual appetites.

A pound of bread "of full weight," *panis libra una propensa*, should be enough for each, whether there is a single meal or two. In addition the holy Patriarch allows two boiled dishes, to which may be added fruit or fresh vegetables. For drink, about half a pint of wine makes up the daily ration.⁷

Nevertheless, these regulations are not hard and fast. Meals vary with the climate as well as with individuals, and the abbots therefore have the power to fix the Rule in regard to food and drink. St. Benedict recommends this explicitly, on condition, of course, that the abbot's kindness must not give rise to grave excesses.⁸

⁷ One *hemina* was allowed, corresponding to one half pint. The use of wine, moreover, has become exceptional. In most monasteries the monks drink beer or some other beverage.

⁸ "If some extraordinary labor should come unexpectedly, it shall depend upon the abbot's will and power to add something, in case it should be expedient, above all avoiding excesses, in order that the monk may never be overtaken by indigestion, because there is nothing so opposed to the character of a Christian, whosoever he may be, as excess in eating, according to the words of our Lord: 'Watch that your hearts be not made heavy with wine and drunkenness.' Cf. *Reg. S. Bened.*, c. xxxix. There is the same recommendation concerning the use of wine. In this connection the holy Patriarch writes, not without delightful irony: "We read, it is true, that

The superiors, moreover, have at all times used good judgment in the exercise of this prerogative. Some have practiced it with modification, such as St. Cæsarius, who was of the opinion that on the great feasts of the year the brothers should be served with *dulceamina*, which means "gratifications."

It is apparent, therefore, that the Rule is capable of sufficient elasticity to make possible in experienced hands the strictest interpretation of abstinence or the lenient usage of *dulceamina*. And even though I have seen the pint measure exceeded in Germany, I have been able to admire in many monasteries the strict observance of the original regulations.

However abundant the food no lapse of the proper decorum is ever seen. The sight of a Benedictine refectory at the hour when the monks are gathered there is worth seeing. A mathematical order reigns in the table-service and in the entire repast. The thoughts are fixed

wine is nowise becoming to monks; but as one cannot persuade the monks of this in our days, let us agree at least not to drink of it unto satiety; because wine makes even wise men fall away." Cf. *Reg.*, c. xl. And he declares: "As for those to whom God gives the power to dispense with it, may they be assured that they will receive for it a special recompense (*mercedem propriam*)."
Ibid.

inward as each one pursues his own.⁹ The ears attend only to the voice of the reader. Hardly the suggestion of a smile broadens the faces even though an idea or a word in the reading might provoke it. The gestures are imbued with the general spirit of the atmosphere. When drinking, all take their glasses in both hands as for an offering. The eyes do not linger over the food which is served, they see beyond it and rise above it as if to forget it in a contemplation which must not be disturbed.

At the end of the meal the left-overs are gathered lest they should be lost. This is done in memory of the Lord, who said: *Colligite fragmenta, ne pereant*—"Gather the fragments lest they be lost." For this purpose a server brings two plates which he hands, one to the abbot and the other to one of the Fathers. These plates pass from hand to hand, and their contents are placed in a hamper, later to be used to make a cake for the poor, and if there are no poor, the cake is distributed among the brothers at the

⁹ Cassian reports that in order to run no risk of distraction, the Egyptian monks drew the cowl over their eyes. In this manner they could see nothing but the food set before them. We should add that the eyes of these monks of old detached themselves as soon as possible from the sight of the food, in order that they might contemplate nothing but the spiritual things which were essentially dear to them.

next meal. This is done, not out of greed, but out of humility and respect for the food which the Lord sends us.¹⁰

Finally, at a sign from the abbot, the meal is suddenly interrupted. The reader stops without finishing the line he has commenced. He steps down from his chair, and in the midst of the silence he chants the versicle, *Tu autem Domine miserere nobis. Deo gratias*, answer the brothers, standing before their tables. The abbot gives thanks to God, and all, beginning with the youngest monks, walk towards the church, chanting the penitential psalms. Thus the brothers leave, two by two in a long line, walking the length of the cloisters, chanting psalms, until they reach the choir with its familiar stalls, from which their thanksgiving soars upward towards the Lord. And so their

¹⁰ This edifying custom owes its origin to the abbot St. Stephen. In this connection let us recall the famous anecdote told by Dom Dubourg in his book on St. Odo, and by Mabillon in the *Acta Sanctorum O. S. B., V. siècle bénédictin*.—The future abbot of Cluny one day held the precious crumbs in his hands when the abbot gave the signal for the end of the meal. The saintly monk's mind suddenly found itself in a cruel dilemma. Should he eat the crumbs or throw them on the floor, in either case breaking the Rule? Not daring to seek such a solution, Odo, with an air of contrition and his hands opened, fell on his knees before Abbot Bernon. And what was not the abbot's surprise when he discovered in the humbly outstretched hands, not the left-overs from the meal, but the finest bright pearls, as pure as the intentions of his brother.

hours follow one another in undisturbed harmony, and just as they have entered the refectory in a mist of devotion, so they leave it in the blessed music of prayer.

Three words stand out in relief on the reader's chair, *Cibus cibo melior*. They sum up the atmosphere of the refectory. They confirm the impression of the guest who has come to seat himself in the midst of the monks.

Is not the brightness which the high windows profusely reflect a spiritual brightness? I say this in all sincerity; what I perceive there is not an image, but an essence that floods my soul.

Moreover, the food which offers itself here is not food for the body but for the soul, holier and better. Even before the reader has begun the reading, with the silent entry of the brothers, one might say that a new office is about to be celebrated, or rather that the office is continued.

This hour reveals its sacred quality by the same token as the rest; perhaps with more austerity, since in place of the supple inflections of the psalmody the ear receives nothing but the delivery in the monotone of the reader. This sometimes makes it impossible during one's first meal to give sustained attention to the matter of the reading, unless one resolutely decides to for-

get the dishes which are served. The unvarying tone used by the reader compels the mind to great concentration, the more so since the pauses, during which he rests in order the better to deliver the phrase he is about to read, throw into marked relief the monotony of his voice.

As a compensation, the matter of the reading shows a great variety. Texts from holy Scripture form its main element, while those from the Fathers of the Church hold an important place also. No day goes by without the reading of a chapter of the Rule. Finally, the lives of the saints and many contemporary works, especially on historical subjects, complete the list of selected texts.

It might be thought that the interest of the texts would become for the most part neutralized through being read in a monotonous voice. Far from being true, often the thought or word receives an unexpected value and an incomparable savor from this circumstance. I remember having heard read in this manner the admirable pages written by Newman on the night of his conversion. The absence of inflection in the reader's voice gave me a feeling which I never before had experienced. Newman's thought seemed to me suddenly simplified, naked, radiat-

ing in a superhuman beauty, and I was unable to control the tears which welled up in my eyes.

Moreover, there is no weariness nor sadness in this voice. Rather, it produces a contrary effect by its insistence on the listeners' attention, and I have never discovered an expression of dullness or inattention on the face of a single brother or guest.

There are exceptions also to the rule which gives first place to the reading in the refectory. On certain feasts conversation is allowed during the meals, but even on such days silence is apt to persist to a certain extent in the refectory; so accustomed are these walls to its reign that the brothers fear to disturb its wonted harmony by ill moderated voices. The mirth of the monks also shows a reserve and a spirituality which make it richer and more beautiful.¹¹

This becomes still more apparent on certain days of the year when feasts of a family character are celebrated, and the refectory takes on a quite particular air of rejoicing. Such is the

¹¹ In an article in the *Revue bénédictine*, Dom Morin remarks in this connection that conversation was allowed, provided it did not exceed the limits of modest merriness, and that it contributed to the welfare of the soul. And he adds with some malice: "It is true that this example refers to communities of women, who more than men have a natural need for conversation." *Op. cit.*, 1890, pp. 170-177.

abbot's feastday, on which his table is decorated with a beautiful bouquet of wild flowers; the Christmas season, during which a crib stands between the tables, ablaze with candles and surrounded with green plants; and Easter day when, as I witnessed one year, eggs are placed on each plate, which are decorated ironically by the monks of a neighboring cloister with representations of each Father's pet sin painted on the face of the egg.

But if the refectory is occasionally brightened by such simple merriment, it is at times also darkened by gloomy thoughts. When one of the brothers dies, a small crucifix is erected at the place where he was wont to sit every day. The form of Jesus crucified humbly occupies it for thirty days. The servers set the food and drink there as usual. The spiritual presence of the departed remains. When the meal is over these dishes, which have not been touched, are given to the poor.

Such are the hours in the refectory, hours of friendly harmony, closely associated with every event, be it sad or joyful, in the monastic family. Nothing lowers the living flame of the spirit there. Between those blessed walls an offering is performed, a prayer is sent up. The

walls are like those of a church, and the tables change into communion tables.

So the work of love finds its étape-hour in the course of the day, when the body is strengthened that it may the better bear its spirit and exalt its soul. Above the entrance of the refectory the little word *Pax* again opens its arms, powerful as the branches of the tree of life, tender as the arms of the Virgin Mary, and sweet as those of Jesus.

When I think of the friendly beauty I have drunk in there so many times, though it is far from me, far in the dim distance, I cannot help seeing, in the light of the Gospel, the poor woman of Canaan who with tears begged for the left-overs from the table—the crumbs. Then voices from my very innermost being whisper the sacred words, *Colligite fragmenta, ne pereant*.

IX

RECREATION AND THE MONASTERY GARDEN

BEYOND the silence of the cloisters, the monks' garden reposes peacefully under the vast light of changing heavens, bathed in the noonday sun or in the purple rays of twilight.

The high towers stretching the coolness of their blue shadows over its walks, provide it with a shelter during the hot hours. From the flowers springing from its soil arise mists of incense and of dew. It is like a voice singing its perpetual cantilena of mystic love where all is beauty, tenderness and peace, and one may dream there of paradise and of angelic serenity. The woods retain their mystery, and the straight walks are white as souls.

This is the monks' garden, the shelter where the flowers of heaven grow and the joy of the brothers. In no other place could the sons of St. Benedict gather with greater happiness during their short moments of recreation. It was only after long years, however, that the garden was chosen for this purpose. To begin with, the

recreation was taken within the monastery; nay, more—at the very beginning of monastic life, the thought of taking recreation had not crossed the monks' mind, and we must go on to the beginning of the ninth century before this thought took shape and substance. At that time, however, a period of recreation was provided for in all the monasteries. In our day, the monks are able to enjoy its charm daily. When grace has been pronounced at the end of each meal, the abbot leads his flock into the garden of the monastery.¹

The monastery garden—what unforgettable hours may not be spent there by one who can close his eyes to the tribulations of the world which are without grace, and open them in the simplicity of his heart to the beauty of the things which surround him and of the souls that move about him!

Hardly is the silence broken before the procession of brothers spreads out between the well-nursed flower-beds, the plants of the vegetable

¹ Formerly, the first recreation was taken in the morning after chapter. The second was taken after None in summer, and after Sext in winter. Dom Morin writes that the first attempt made to introduce recreation after dinner was condemned by a general chapter of abbots in England in 1249 as contrary to the Rule and too likely to invite light and frivolous conversation. Cf. *Rev. bénéd.*, 1889, p. 350.

garden and the fruit laden trees. The younger ones fly about gayly and their laughter vibrates over the flowers and trees like a dew of happiness. Groups form and stroll slowly wherever the whim of the moment takes them. The three wings of the garden which radiate from the abbey resound with the echo of discourses, secrets, and meditations.

The Father abbot walks usually in company with some of the older monks. Those who go before him walk backwards so as to face him all the time. After all, the monastic regulations prescribe this attitude for all the brothers. The strictest politeness is observed in all conversations. Each one, mindful of the Rule,² avoids lengthy discussions in order not to speak evil or useless words. Interruptions, contradictions and unseemly irony are rigorously banished from the conversation. No one tries to take the first place. With the exception of the abbot, for whom this place must be reserved, the brothers

² The Rule recalls Prov. x: "Thou shalt not avoid sin by much speech." It adds: "It pertains to a master to speak and to instruct, to be silent and to listen belongs to the disciple." And, "as to jokes (*scurrilitates*), vain words, and such which cannot fail to provoke laughter, we condemn them for ever and everywhere, and we do not permit the disciple to open his lips for such discourses." Cf. *Reg.*, c. vi. See also, in c. vii, the different degrees of humility, especially the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth.

usually group themselves in a circle so that none may think that one of them has failed in holy modesty.

These signs of deference, which the brothers show one another at all times, bear in them the balm of grace. "See that you honor one another," preached St. Paul, the Apostle.³ The attentiveness of their eyes and the friendliness of their lips are constant indications that they follow this good precept. If an older monk should happen to pass by where a young monk sits, the latter immediately rises to his feet and offers him his place but the older man, refusing to take advantage of the privilege his age gives him, quickly signs to his junior to resume his place. This is a way of respecting the wish of the great Patriarch that "the younger shall honor their seniors, and the older shall show affection for their juniors."⁴

Moreover, as we have said elsewhere, the brothers have for custom to keep their heads bent forward and their eyes lowered towards the ground. The humility which must never cease to reign in their hearts expresses itself in all simplicity in this manner, and they do not give

³ Rom. xii, 10. Cf. *Reg.*, c. lxxii.

⁴ *Reg.*, c. lxiii.

the impression of yielding to fatigue or relaxation when they let their heads lean towards their shoulders.⁵

Elsewhere in the Rule is found a chapter which enumerates qualities of which the sum total marks perfection in the attitude which the brothers should observe in their daily relations. It is imbued with a spirit of holiness, appealing by force of humility, and disconcerting by the high perfection which it maintains. The chapter is entitled, "Concerning the good zeal which the monks should show," and it would be unpardonable for me not to transcribe it in whole. It reads as follows:

"As there is a zeal of bitterness, which is evil, and which separates one from God and leads to hell, so there is also a good zeal, which removes vice and leads to God and to life everlasting. The monks should therefore exercise this zeal with fervent love, that is to say:

⁵ "A monk must show his humility wherever he happens to be, whether seated, walking, or standing, always keeping his head bent (*inclinato semper capite*), his eyes lowered towards the ground (*defixis in terram semper aspectibus*), and always feeling the weight of his sins as at the moment of appearing at the formidable judgment of God, and he must continually repeat in his heart what the publican in the Gospel said, his eyes turned towards the ground: 'Lord, I, a sinner, am not worthy to lift my eyes towards heaven.' And again with the Prophet: 'I am always bent down and humbled.'" Cf. *Reg.*, c. vii.

“They should be prepared to honor one another.

“They should with great patience bear with the infirmities of others, be they bodily or spiritual.

“They should obey one another in emulation.

“Let no one seek the things he deems of advantage to himself, but rather those that are of advantage to others.

“They should chastely pay the due of fraternal charity.

“They should fear God with a fear tempered by love.

“They should love their abbot with a humble and sincere affection.

“They should prefer absolutely nothing to Jesus Christ, whom may it please to lead us all together to eternal life. Amen.”⁶

Such is the breviary of high virtues which each day reach greater perfection in the monastery gardens at the hour of recreation. If because of the loftiness of its ideal, this edifying chapter seems to breathe a spirit remote and pure, it does not follow that its object is beyond the reach of nature.

⁶ *Reg.*, c. lxxii.

The guest who has walked about in a Benedictine garden at the hour to which I refer, convinces himself easily of this fact. As for myself, having lingered there often since my first visit, I could divine the contents of that little chapter before I had read it. Great was my joy in going over it after having seen its teachings practiced! I remember the satisfaction with which I repeated again and again—it is true—that is the humble, simple, perfect truth.

It must not be thought, however, that mirth is always banished from the recreation time, simply because humility and reserve are of its essence. In the austere days of Clairvaux, the great St. Bernard saw to it that a tone of the greatest gravity should prevail during the hours of recreation. St. Odo, the grave abbot of Cluny, was pleased to direct the conversation himself in order to dispel from it every shadow of sullenness. His biographer tells this, not without a touch of humor. "In the end," he writes, "he would tell us such amusing things that we were unable to hold back laughter. Then, in order to moderate our expression of gayety, he would retort with the words of the Rule, 'one must not love the excess of laughter,'

or again, 'a monk must not be yielding nor prone to laughter.'⁷ By this means the laughter was checked, but the man of God had attained his purpose, and a spiritual joyfulness remained in our innermost heart."⁸

In view of such regulations and precepts it is natural to wonder about the subject-matter of the monks' recreational conversations. Even this is found determined and recorded in exact lists. On examining them we learn that the conversation was to revolve frequently around paradise, purgatory, death and a hundred other subjects. No doubt, to people of the world these subjects would seem rather safe against mirth but within the walls of a cloister, and especially within the calm enclosure of the monastic garden, this is not quite the case. Nothing corresponds with this atmosphere. One breathes in it an air of the absolute and of eternity which puts our vain daily cares to shame, and it would be a great mistake to imagine that these conversations were held with stern and severe faces. In the mind of the monks even death creates only

⁷ "*Risum multum excussum non amare*" and "*Monachus non sit facilis aut promptus in risu.*"

⁸ Reported by Dom Morin, *loc. cit.*

harmonious thoughts and brings to their lips only an unspeakable smile of peace.⁹

In the old monasteries which at times sheltered hundreds of monks, a division was made into compact groups,¹⁰ and the abbot himself indicated the subject for conversation, if he did not arrange for a spiritual conference of a few minutes' duration from which the theme for discussion could be drawn.

To-day these conversations are governed more liberally. Most of the time the abbot leaves the matter to each one's good judgment. In order to insure greater intimacy the larger groups are split up, and if this change of practice had not already taken place spontaneously, it would have been brought about by the new custom of walks in which the monks engage on certain days.

On the other hand, from a spiritual as well as from a psychological point of view, it is well that the experiment was made. The mind is more easily collected and displays its activity to

⁹ Let us add that in our days the theme of these conversations may vary indefinitely, provided that the greatest decorum is always maintained. News from the outside world, journals received at the monastery, the latest books published, and the serious events of contemporary life furnish ample material for discussion.

¹⁰ The monks of Cluny, notably, practiced this custom which was inaugurated by those of Corbie in the ninth century.

better advantage within the limits of a private conversation. In this manner a more definite personality is acquired, and the power of thought is perfected in proportion as the obstacles are removed which prevented it from functioning according to the free play of the will.

There is nothing that may not be allowed, even to the isolation proper to meditation. Nevertheless, it must be said that such isolation is exceptional, for it is not fitting that one who has taken a vow to live in a community should revel in a solitude which upon reflection is not without its dangers and which may result in moroseness.

Is it not a sin to be morose? To be sure, sadness is surrounded with a certain grace and charm, but at the same time it bears within it the seeds of weakness. For this reason its place is in the world. It should be foreign to a monk, and joy alone should be apparent in the faces of those who live with the image of Jesus in their hearts. In the monastic community life a monk possesses the most efficacious means of avoiding sadness.

The hours of recreation, however, are not spent exclusively in discourses and meditation. Considerable time is given to strictly private

affairs. Thus the superior has the letters distributed which have just arrived. During this period the monks may also secure from the officials of the convent such articles as books, ink, and any articles which they may need. There is a mutual exchange of news items which are of interest to the heart as well as to the mind, and there are also precious minutes of relaxation when the monks show their love and charity, each towards all.

The proof of this is evident at this very hour and in this very place, the better because it is not forced. We are no more at the solemn moments of the offices. There is no conflict, no severity, but only the innocent simplicity of a pure conscience. The garden is transformed into a human paradise, in which a sheaf of humble virtues grows in virginal shyness. The precepts of the "little chapter" fill the air with their grave, sweet beauty like invisible flowers falling on forehead and lips, their fragrance permeating one's whole being. The Rule lives here, all-powerful yet infinitely mild, too beautiful and too loveable to be ignored or forgotten.

From all these souls who have vowed themselves to God there rises up a pregnant odor of human love and, far from encroaching upon

each other, the two loves, the divine and the human, instinctively support each other in their rise. In this garden of salvation as in no other place one comes to understand the brotherhood of man, and against its background the divine love appears more accessible and tangible. It is written in the *Following of Christ*: "*Amor modum saepe nescit, sed super omnem modum fervescit.*" It is quite true that pure love can be conceived only as a pure force, that it matters little whether one knows how and why one loves, that love would shrink by being analyzed, and that it has a real existence only in the measure in which it participates in mystery.

Here a gesture, a word, a look or an inflection of the voice are irradiated with a light not of this world, but in which there remains nevertheless a suggestion of human nature. It is properly so. It is the expression of Christian love, drawn from all energy and all beauty which, although human, yet emanate from God.

What fragrance can compare with that of such perfect souls who are so constantly engaged in the work of love that they are unmindful of all else, walk their way unwearyingly in humility and vanquish pain with the invincible serenity of the elect!

X

VESPERS AND NONE

THE monks of old ranked Vespers with Matins and Lauds as an hour of special solemnity. Before celebrating this office, however, the community first chants the prayer of None, the last of the "little hours" and the ninth of the day, which is the most sorrowful since it recalls the hour when Jesus, after having forgiven his executioners, expired on the cross.¹

Already daylight is fading, and the sun sinks down on the horizon, trailing in its wake the brightness of the day. A still peace spreads over the monastery. A thousand activities in nature are abating. This is the hour which St. Ambrose called the *hora incensi*, the hour of the incense, it is the hour of the first lamps, the *lucernarium* of the ancients, the vesper-hour which has been celebrated since the days of the

¹ Formerly an interval elapsed between the chant of None and that of Vespers. In summer None was chanted at 1.45 P. M. and Vespers at 5.30 P. M. or even at 7.00 P. M. according to the length of the day. During the winter period Vespers were celebrated at 4.30 P. M. or at 6.00 P. M., according as None had been chanted at two or three o'clock. In our days Vespers are chanted immediately after None.

Apostles and which the Church compares to the hour when the Hebrews performed their evening sacrifice ² and threw incense under the vaults as an offering to God.

At the decline of day the first Christians wanted to give thanks to God for the favors He had bestowed on them. They did not forget that it was precisely at this hour that Jesus had consummated the supreme sacrifice of love by instituting the holy sacrament of the Eucharist. The deep feeling of this moment can be expressed only in hymns of particular beauty and in a ritual of true splendor. As an example the following evening hymn is quoted, which is contemporary with St. Clement of Alexandria, and has been preserved in the present canonical office of the Greek Church.

O blessed Jesus Christ,
Joyful light of the holy glory of the immortal
Father,
The Heavenly, the Holy!
Now being come unto the setting of the sun,
And beholding the light of evening,
We bless the Father and the Son,
And the Holy Spirit of God.
Worthy art Thou at all times

² Exod. xxix, 36.

To be praised with holy voices,
 O Son of God that givest life,
 Therefore doth all the world glorify Thee. ³

For further confirmation we may read the following account by the Abbess Etheria: ⁴ "At the tenth hour—the hour which they call here *licinion*, and which we call *lucernare*—the people crowd into the Anastasis. All the candles are lit, and the illumination is brilliant. Then they chant the evening psalms (*psalmi lucernares*)—psalms sung antiphonally at great length. At the appointed moment, word is sent to the bishop. He comes down, and seats himself on his lofty throne, with the priests in their places round him. When the chanting of the psalms and antiphons is finished, the bishop rises, and stands upright in front of the balustrade of the sanctuary, while a deacon reads out the names of all those who are to be prayed for, and the *pisinni*, or children, of whom there are great numbers, respond at each name '*Kyrie eleison*.' You hear as it were the sound of innumerable voices. The deacon having finished the list, the bishop recites a prayer. It is the prayer for all

³ Cited by Monsignor Pierre Batiffol in his *History of the Roman Breviary*. English translation by Atwell M. Y. Baylay, 1912, p. 7, and borrowed from Sozom., H. TE. iii, 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

the congregation; both the faithful and the catechumens have part in it. Then the bishop recites the prayer for the catechumens and these, at a sign given them by the deacon, bow their heads while the bishop gives the *benedictionem super catechumenos*. Lastly the bishop says the prayer for the faithful who in their turn, at the sign given by the deacon, bow down themselves for the episcopal benediction. So ends the office: every one departs after kissing the bishop's hand—*et sic fit Missa Anastasii*—the night is now dark." This is how the office of Vespers was celebrated in Jerusalem towards the end of the fourth century.

The holy Patriarch did not preserve the original character of the evening prayer, as Cassian, on the contrary, did, calling it the hour of the lamps, *lucernaris hora*, because of the lateness of the hour when it was recited. Through St. Benedict it has become the office of the afternoon. His disciples, however, have perpetuated its splendor—nay, more, they have enriched it with the most beautiful hymns and with the purest melodies known to tradition, and the majestic prayer of Vespers, a sister-prayer of the refreshing Lauds, glitters in shining majesty over the whole Benedictine liturgy.

The bells have rung, the monks are in the choir and None is being chanted. The priests, vested in copes, and the acolytes have followed to the altar the track of incense and light made by the brothers who carry candles or scatter clouds of incense, while the organ has filled the nave and side-ships with its immense voice. Silence now falls and the first antiphon rings out from the lips of a priest, followed almost immediately by the opening psalm, *Dixit Dominus meo*, like an eternal breath of glory in which the chanting spirit of the psalmody has beaten since biblical days. The versicles roll out, now accelerated, now relented. It is as if the long drawn out cry of the spirit of Israel rises from the many throats and hovers about the choir, steady and uninterrupted until the last words of each psalm are submerged in the calm depths of the doxology.

Now come the chapter, the response and the hymn, followed by the *Magnificat*. This Canticle of the Blessed Virgin is an exaltation of humility, a rapture of praise, of bliss, and of adoration, so deep and so great that the monks stand up when they sing it, first signing themselves with the sign of the cross on forehead and breast, and the priest, standing on the steps of

the altar, immerses the crucifix in dense clouds of incense that rise about the burning candles as symbols of love and purification.

The prayers chanted at Vespers resemble those of Lauds,⁵ and those in which the Blessed Virgin is honored are of special beauty. Precious ritual texts are used in privileged seasons, such as at Easter when, according to Lafranc, the regular monks recited all the psalms under this single antiphon, *Sancti tui Domine flore-bunt sicut lilium, alleluia, et sicut odor balsami erunt ante te, alleluia.*"⁶

I wish to recall still another liturgical exercise of great antiquity, which formerly was added to the office of Lauds as well as to that of Vespers, and which St. Benedict called the *supplicatio litaniae*.⁷ This supplication contained a series of prayers, arranged by St. Columban in the seventh century, all devoted to the faithful, the priests, the community, the prince, those in

⁵ "The evening office shall be composed of four psalms with antiphons. After these psalms there shall be recited a lesson of the Apostle; then the Response, the Ambrosian hymn, the Versicle, the Gospel-canticle, the litany, and the Sunday oration, and finally dismissal."—*Reg.*, c. xvii.

⁶ "Thy saints, O Lord, shall flourish as the lilies, alleluia, and as an odor of balsam shall they be before thee, alleluia."—Reported by Dom Martène, *op. cit.*, l. I, c. x.

⁷ Cf. Batiffol, *op. cit.*

captivity, and the departed—prayers of commemoration and of holy love.

The office of Vespers ends like those of other hours. In the early days the door of the church was closed when the last orison had been recited. The monks then went to the dormitory. They removed their footwear for day use and put on that for night use. Then they went to the place designated for their private reading and did not stir again until they were called to the refectory. Then they were allowed to quench their thirst, whereupon all partook of the collation.

This is how the solemn hour of Vespers was celebrated, the peaceful hour of the evening star which, according to the words of St. Isidore, is said to rise out of the fires of the setting sun: *Vesper a sidere quod vesper vocatur, et decidente sole exoritur.*

XI

THE LIBRARY

AN old proverb, cherished above all others in the Benedictine order, says that a monastery without a library is like a camp without an arsenal—*Monasterium sine armario quasi castrum sine armamentario*. That proverb speaks the truth. A cloister where labor is the rule would be inconceivable if deprived of its most essential auxiliary.

No matter how far back we may go into the past of monasticism, we never fail to discover traces of the monks' love for books. From the very beginning the monks searched for them as a precious heritage. St. Pachomius cherished them as a priceless treasure, his enthusiasm gained followers, and as we push on in history, we see those storehouses developed and enriched which are the genuine sources of our civilization. This fact cannot be overemphasized, for in an age when the world at large hardly knew what was meant by a book, the monks had already collected a large number of texts. Even in those

days there was not a monastery which did not have its library, not only to enhance its own spiritual life, but to sow in the soil of the Europe of that day the germs of intellectual culture. One can easily understand how such kings as Charlemagne were faithful in contributing to the enrichment of the monastic libraries.

When Benedict embraced the monastic life, its centers of influence were already firmly established. There remained for him to organize the time of his sons and to determine how it should be divided between the cultivation of the intellect and that of the spirit, the labor of prayer.

We shall presently examine the works likely to be found in a Benedictine abbey. Let us point out, however, at the outset that the monks were not content with merely collecting books; the work of copying manuscripts, also, was one of their principal occupations. In the bosom of the *Scriptorium* and under the direction of an old monk, the *armarius*, the monks, divided into groups, worked on this holy task with the most fervent care. They undertook to transcribe not only sacred texts but also those of such men as Aristotle, Titian, Livy, Vergil, Ovid, Cicero, and Horace—everything, in fact, that has been left

to us of the glories of ancient thought.¹ Cassiodore encouraged this work, saying: "That of copying books has always appealed to me more than any other work." A thousand other abbots gave evidence of the same disposition, and one may imagine what services have thus been rendered the intellectual world.² We should, moreover, recognize in the zeal with which the religious devoted themselves to this task, not only a very rigorous devotion to learning but also the development of a taste which promptly gave

¹ To quote but one example, let us recall that the first five books of the *Annales* of Tacitus were thus preserved by the abbey of Corbie.

² Cf. the speech by M. Babelon at the celebration of the millenary of Cluny in September, 1910, reported in *Une Journée chez les Moines*: "There is one side of the monks' activity which should suffice to assure them, as long as humanity shall exist, the recognition of every intelligent, thinking man. What they have handed down from century to century in order to bequeath it to us is the priceless treasure of ancient literature, which they have guarded as carefully as the Vestals guarded the sacred fire. The monks of the Middle Ages constitute the connecting link between antiquity and the modern mind. They have prevented a sudden and complete rupture from taking place in the normal development of the human mind, a fearful break in continuity which would have thrown civilization into an abyss, and would have retarded it for an incalculable number of centuries. Antiquity would have been almost forgotten and certainly misunderstood. Under the thrust of the Germanic barbarism it would have vanished in a general disaster, more fatal still than that which brought to nothing the intellectual labor of the great civilizations of Egypt and the Asiatic empires. Robbed of the literary treasures of the Greeks and Romans we would have been lacking the main foundations of our modern culture. Who would dare to think of the consequences such a catastrophe would have brought in train for humanity?"

birth to the most varied and valuable artistic expression. Though some of the poorer monks, such as those of St. Blase, found themselves reduced to the necessity of using the stylus on birch-bark, there is ample compensation for this in the psalteries, the missals, and the breviaries of the Middle Ages, bound in the same magnificent reliefs, enriched with engravings and illuminations which only a spiritual sense of beauty could produce, and made possible by a truly superhuman patience. As a fact, many of these old books testify to the labor, not of one but of several monks. Can one doubt that these indefatigable workers, these artists without name who held worldly honors in contempt, were inspired by a zeal based on a profound sense of the everlasting?

Among the first monasteries to pride themselves on the assembling of important collections should be counted those of Saint-Wandrill, Fleury-sur-Loire, Bobbio which inherited Cassiodore's literary collections, Saint-Amand, Corbie, Aniana, Saint-Gall, and also Reichenau, which in the beginning of the ninth century owned four hundred and fifty manuscripts.³ Later the Maurists collected more than three

³ Dom Usmer Berlière, *op. cit.*, p. 122-123.

thousand, and there is the library of Saint-Germain in Paris with its sixty thousand books and eight thousand manuscripts. In our days the wealth of the libraries of Vienna, Dresden, and Berlin, is well known.

Ever since early days, then, the library of a Benedictine abbey has been important as a repository into which the intellectual zeal of the religious gathered innumerable documents that they might be saved from dispersal or destruction. Nothing is more edifying than to see these sacred arsenals arise as safeguards of culture and civilization in the midst of an age when frequent wars and rude living were the common-places of the times.

The corner of the abbey in which the library is situated seems quite particularly a place of silence and peace. It is only fitting that a spirit of reflection should prevail in that spot where one of the chief functions of conventual life is carried on, just as it does in the church, the cell, and the long cloisters where the soul moves among purely spiritual duties.

Within the library the silent atmosphere is enhanced by the bright light that pours in through the high windows. Each ray of light that falls on the tall bookcases, is reflected again

by the book on which it falls and the effect is a very cheering one. The wood of the tables and chairs is lit up and the great crucifix over the entrance broods upon this temple of toil with its spirit of resignation to death, and gives to this tenderly haloed scene the feeling of its own great significance. Here every task is done and every thought is formed in the eternal presence of Jesus, who lends His consciousness, His spirit, and His force.

What text and what topics are to be found, then, among the many thousand books arranged along the shelves? First of all, there are innumerable editions of sacred Scripture, the foremost source and light of God, which the monks have known and on which they have meditated through all the ages. As closely akin to sacred Scripture stand the commentaries which have grown from it in the course of the centuries. Then there are the writings of the Church Fathers, the source of ecclesiastical discipline, in which are found the Christian homilies and the documents containing the martyrs' testimony. Further on are found the Conferences and Institutions of Cassian, the gigantic works of the Maurists, exegetes of the most precise of sciences whose application is also the most dif-

ficult. Here we encounter books of dogmatic theology, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Anselm, St. Bonaventure, Peter Lombard, the writings of the Saltzburg Benedictines, the Studies and Annals of Mabillon, the History of the Saints by the Bollandists, the many works through which the monks may become acquainted with the subtleties of moral and ascetic theology, of philosophy, and of canon law. In addition, there are historical, scientific, and literary works, many works devoted to art, and works on liturgy, always dear to the Benedictines, particularly to the Maurists who used a most scrupulous skill in their construction, and to Dom Guéranger who necessarily employed a more modern critique on this subject. The breviaries, missals, horaria, pontifical books, Gregorian collections, and antiphonaries, splendid witnesses to the zeal of the brothers in the field of liturgy, bespeak their harmonious Christian love.

There still remain thousands and thousands of volumes, from venerable folios to the minutest editions, all unique treasures which testify to a variety in learning both in secular and in religious branches. The monk's culture is drawn from this vast number of books and manuscripts, and the knowledge he acquires from

them militates towards the expansion of his mental life as well as the liberation of his spirit.

Whether in the most remote ages, in our time or in the days between, there is not a century that is not represented in the Benedictine libraries, the variety, the number, and the value of whose contents attest to its efforts put forth. It is with full justice, therefore, that the library of a convent has been compared to an arsenal. Let us add that every monastery receives modern books, journals and other publications, and if some Father should find that material of this kind, necessary to his work, were not in the library, he would report this to the librarian or to his abbot, who as a matter of duty would send his son wherever his task called him.

The abbot has not sufficient leisure to look after the organization of the library and the consequent necessity of appointing a librarian has been recognized since the very earliest days.

The librarian's task is a heavy one. Not only must he keep incessant watch over the place which contains these priceless treasures, but no charge requires more intelligence, more accuracy, or more skill than his. Whether it be to arrange the catalogue, to classify the books, to regulate loans of books, to purchase new pub-

lications within the limits of his budget, the librarian must prove himself a man of very diverse abilities. It is his duty to keep abreast of new publications of books and articles which may be of interest in the convent. He must ever keep his bibliographic knowledge up to date in order to be in a position to furnish his brothers with such information as they may seek from him. Moreover it is not enough that he should be able to play this rôle of a living catalogue, he must also show each and all on every occasion that courteous and obliging patience, which is not always met with among men of the world, but which here assumes the character of a duty and a virtue. Besides, is it apparent that patience at any cost is part of the very nature of his work? If there should be any doubt in this matter, it would suffice to recall the famous example cited by Dom Tassin. The historian refers to Dom Jacques Loyau, a Benedictine of Saint-Maur. I can think of no more edifying example of conscientiousness than that of this monk who, when called to Saint-Germain-des-Prés, edited there in two series, the alphabetical catalogue of all the subjects contained in the printed books of the abbey, the first composed

of fifteen, and the second of twenty-two folio volumes.⁴

A last responsibility rests on the Father librarian; he is the keeper of no less a thing than the keys of hell. The hell of this place, we may well guess, resolves itself to a very small one. Yet, what untold consequences of harm may not result from the small closet where poisonous books are kept. These evil books rest under the watchful eye of the librarian. At times he releases them temporarily, to some brother who finds himself obliged to consult them, but this is never done without special authorization.

The importance of the librarian as here described may seem exaggerated to one who has never crossed a Benedictine threshold, but that would be an error. No function is more laborious nor more useful than his.

To see in the monastic library merely a collection of books and manuscripts, no matter how precious, would not be to accord it its true value. In order to grasp its proper significance, it must be seen from a spiritual angle. The monk makes use of it as a potent means of advancement to perfection, just as he would of any other exter-

⁴ Cf. Dom Tassin, *Histoire Littéraire de la Congregation de Saint-Maur*, pp. 649-650.

nal object. He never forgets that above these tables and these documents hovers the spirit of life and truth. Accordingly, his studies between these walls take on an aspect of prayer, which makes them fruitful and sanctifies them. The work which is performed there goes beyond the boundaries of space and time. One feels that, having been begun in the days of primitive monasticism, nothing can ever interfere with its course and that, like the life of the soul, it can know only an immortal destiny.

The atmosphere of learning is here, as everywhere else, one of the spirit. What are these numberless books, scattered like the dust of the ages, but the spirit of the past, the closed history of the great, universal family and of monastic life? Can we rest our eyes on these volumes without seeing open before us the vista of works to come, the immensity of a toil-filled future, whose solitary and responsible laborer the monk already knows himself to be?

These books, which so many devout ancestors have thumbed lovingly, he in turn opens with the veneration which is the due of sacred relics. On each page he finds traces of their meditations which he continues, perhaps, where they have been interrupted, or begins anew; but at all

events, he hears the chant sung by their hearts and in his heart he echoes the strains and thus enters into holy communions with them.

Liber scriptus intus et foris—a true book is written in the individual heart as well as on paper. These grave words on the foot of the crucifix tell the truth. The young monk, who is just beginning to decipher the vast contents of the library, soon comes to see in it the image of the holy family to which he henceforth belongs. He comes to grasp the depth of its teaching and the force of its significance as a tradition. He need not long reflect before reaching the conclusion that together with his love, it demands from him an expenditure of devoted labor that he in his turn may enrich it. A firm resolution is required for this, and the young brother will do well to bear in mind the monks of St. Bruno who in spite of their poverty gathered a precious treasure of books.

A Benedictine library can never be too rich. Not only does it constitute a bulwark behind which the works of antiquity have found shelter against every danger and barbarism, but it also rises as a temple of meditation and as a center of spiritual life. Moreover, the monks have long since turned it into a laboratory for science,

the efficiency of which is evident to all who are not ignorant of the intellectual life of past and present.

In truth, then, this place, which the monks hold in equal reverence with the other important places of the monastery, impresses with singular intensity one who, on departing, turns to embrace it in a look. It seems as if, from under its vaults that are bathed in light, just as from under the high arches of the church, there arises slowly and silently a forest of candles in a cloud of incense. Thus the spirit moves on in its course, thus it floats calmly over the ocean of centuries, stronger than any other force, the unfailing, invincible power of eternity.

XII

COMPLINE

I recall a September evening in the languid beginning of autumn when the air was mild and sweetly balmy, one of those lingering evenings when one feels as though another presence inhabited one's soul, and as though the least tremor of the mysterious hour would suffice to drench one's eyes in tears. It was the poet's hour, the critical hour for the sick and withal, the hour for Compline, when weariness ceases, when sorrows fade away and pain becomes dormant. Was it not also at this hour that Jesus began His agony and that His body was laid in the tomb?

At the end of the evening meal I had left the abbey for a walk, longing for solitude and wishing to feast my eyes for a last time on the woods and fields of the surrounding country. A profound peace spread itself over the countryside, and as the mist was blown by the evening breeze, it ascended here and there like a tremor of spiritual beauty. It was a misty fairyland in which every object became unreal. The sun had set,

the moon had just appeared and the stars were still pale and seemed bewildered by the absence of the deep night in which they were wont to show their light. Down below, close to the road and squatting under the crown of the forest, lay the massive gray outline of the silent abbey in an atmosphere of reflection, rapture, and self-effacement.

The naked trees stood out like candles against the sky and the light of agony seemed to hang in the lacework of their branches, sinking from minute to minute to die away at last completely. A whole world was living silently in the purple thickets of the woods. Light vapors rose slowly from the tillage, like the incense of twilight. It was an hour of peace, guarded by immaterial presences, when the heart unconsciously turns towards the things of nature, communes with them, leans on them. I remained there on the road until the moment when the familiar bell sounded, sending its trembling, broken waves through the evening air. Returning the way I had come, I then walked towards the monastery where the last office was about to be celebrated.

Once more within the enclosure of the monastery, I was just about to enter the church when I saw the monks with their cowls over their fore-

heads coming silently from every direction and arranging themselves in two long lines near one of its doors. It was the Station, the gathering before the solemn entry.

At a sign from the abbot the silent procession set itself in motion. A novice, standing on the threshold, held out his hand dipped in holy water, and each one went to his stall blessing himself. I, in my turn, entered the church. The nave and the side-ships were lost in darkness, and I suddenly experienced a sense of infinite restfulness, of superhuman peace. The illumination consisted of a single lamp, giving out a feeble light, while in the open twinkled the star of the Holy Ghost like a restless, feverish soul.

The monks had knelt before their stalls for a short prayer. Presently the lecturer, having first received the abbot's blessing, rose in his chair and read a paragraph from one of St. Gregory's homilies to which, according to custom, he added a text from the famous collection of Cassian's *Collationes*. The name of "Collect before Compline," given to this reading¹ or

¹ In early days, the place chosen for this reading was not the choir but the chapter or even the refectory, as was the custom in the congregation of Bursfeld. In other places the monks assembled in the cloister without any special place for this exercise, and it is for this reason that the Cistercians called this reading the "reading in the cloister"—*lectio claustrī*.

the light meal eaten in the evening on fast-days during the reading of the *Collationes*, is in fact derived from this custom. After a few minutes the abbot made a sign, and the reader immediately interrupted the reading with the words, *Tu autem Domine miserere nobis*. The abbot added, *Adiutorium nostrum in nomine Domini*, to which all responded with *Qui fecit coelum et terram*. At these words the monks stood up; it was now time for Compline.

Compline means completion. In the Latin, the word *Completorium* is pronounced with a musical sound, and its last syllable dies away in the shadows of the vaults, as a failing syllable of the end of day. This office, which was unknown to the early monks and first introduced by St. Benedict, had been arranged in psalmody for the first time in the twilight of the fourth century; it is the prayer on the threshold of night, just as Prime is that of daybreak. Compline or *Completorium*, is an office apart, an hour of lassitude and mourning, for the inner sense of its psalms has to do with nothing less than the trembling approach of night and the body of Jesus on the cross.

Why such imploring ardor in its psalms, hymns, and prayers, if not to deaden the fear

we all feel? "May God grant us a quiet night and a perfect end," the abbot chants, and the brothers answer with the psalm, "Because he hath hoped in me, I shall be his protector, saith the Lord; I shall be his protector, because he hath known my name." The old texts roll out, vibrating over joined hands, murmuring lips and hearts that seek reassurance.

What recollection could be more perfect than that of Compline? I had taken refuge in the loggia above the choir, the same loggia to which the murmur of chanting voices had led me for Matins on the morning after my first arrival. I was alone and in the darkness of the stalls I could barely distinguish the outlines of some of the monks. The chant arose from the ships of the church and touched me lightly on its heavenward way. I did not see, I only heard and felt.

This is the most intimate hour of all in the house of God, when the heart frees itself, when the soul soars high above its usual confines and opens wide its wings to the spirit which inspires it. In the luxury of darkness, a fervor sprung from mysterious unknown sources bathes the faithful, its sweet caress transforms them, and carries them away in rapture. Radiant in new-born youth, the heart hearkens to the voice of

angels, speaking in words of flame and in effulgent symbols. Then, of a sudden, there is a gap in the psalmody. A silence falls in which all life stands still, and in the tension of this expectancy something moves above the bent heads, and the benediction descends from the shadows of the high vaults. How poignantly I felt all this, and how sharply it remains etched upon my memory!

When the abbot had made the sign of the cross above the brothers, a chant arose from the choir, sonorous in its lovely beauty, and interwoven with inflections as tender as caresses and with words melting into tears, a chant of longing love, the *Salve Regina*, in which the inexhaustible, pure devotion of the human heart, made divine by faith, stammers its praise to the Virgin Mother.

What undreamt horizons were not revealed to me by this canticle, modeled on an old Gregorian melody and sung by voices rich with spiritual joy. Words of supplication and of hope, *Mater misericordiae, Vita, Dulcedo, O Clemens, O Pia*, first whirling above the choir, then scaling the nave in their airy flight, and vanishing towards the beyond!

There followed still a few prayers, a commemoration of the departed and of St. Benedict, and so the final silence for the night. The abbot gave the sign for leaving, and the monks disappeared in the darkness. I returned through the cloisters over which the moon shed its pale light. Back again in my cell, I saw that it was a quarter after eight o'clock, the time when the monks retire. The abbey seemed completely wrapped in silence, in that complete silence in which a guest is always uneasy at heart on his first night in a monastery. Only a small clock struck from quarter-hour to quarter-hour.

I lifted my lamp above my eyes and read again the words which were inscribed at the head of my bed—*Salva nos Domine vigilantes, custodi nos dormientes*—"Save us, O Lord, when we are waking, guard us, Thou, when we are sleeping."

With my heart full of the aching mystery of this experience which I had not only looked on but also lived through, I had no more strength to think. I only mused on the *Ways of the Soul*, so completely described by St. Theresa of Avila. I tried to imagine what might be the first tremors, the first outpourings of mystical

rapture, and when I had darkened my cell and crept into bed, a sweet echo whispered the little word, *completorium*, in my soul.

Word of mourning, word of twilight, often since has it chanted in my heart. When evening falls, and the day's fatigue is forgotten in its shadows, it is not often that the tender caress of its last syllable does not reach my ear like the whispering of waves that linger in a little sea-shell. It stirs all the past in my innermost being, and, as for a sacrilege, I always blame myself for the movement of my hand that destroys this cherished vision when it lights the lamp.

XIII

THE MONKS RETIRE

“**A**FTER Compline is ended, it shall not be permitted anybody to talk about anything whatsoever.” This is an extract from the Rule.¹

The abbot has now given the sign for departure. One after another the monks leave the church. Their cowed silhouettes glide along the flagstones and steal silently along the walls to lose themselves in the heavy darkness. They go to their cells, but on their way they wish to make yet another act of sanctification, a visit to the different altars—to those of the Blessed Virgin, St. Joseph, and St. Benedict. Genuflections, mournful whispers, sorrow for faults committed during the day, a whole silent spring of life foams in mute effervescence in the night. Who would not, before he falls asleep, incense his soul in the fragrance of this spiritual viaticum, prepared to surrender it at the summons of God?

¹ *Reg. S. Bened.* c. xlii.

This visit to the altars is a custom of long standing. In the ancient convents, particularly in the Bursfeld congregation, the monks paid it together instead of individually. The young ones went first, under the guidance of their masters, then the brothers. After that, they went to the dormitory where, according to a regulation made by a certain abbot, lips and heart should be transformed into secret sanctuaries while with groans, sighs and tears, each one in his consciousness recalled his various sins. Then followed a last meditation until the moment when, at the tinkling of the abbot's bell, each stretched himself on his bed while reciting the versicle, *Pone Domine custodiam ori meo, et ostium circumstantiae labiis meis*, "O Lord, place Thou a guard at my mouth, and a closing gate over my lips." And so their eyes would close, and with limbs worn from the toil of the day, the brothers fell asleep in God.

The lights in the monastery are extinguished, as we have remarked before, at a quarter after eight o'clock. When the porter has returned the keys to the abbot, the latter occasionally takes a lantern and goes to assure himself that the

regulations for sleep are observed.² In exceptional cases, because of the exigencies of some devotion or work, certain Fathers receive permission to stay up until nine o'clock, but this hour generally marks the end of the waking period.

In fact, their sleep is held sacred, for from this source body and mind must gather new energy for the coming day, new strength for wholesome meditation and fruitful prayer. Once sleep has descended over the cells, it remains uninterrupted—a refreshing channel through which may flow the divine blessing and the healthful dew of peace and oblivion. Smiling on the gray spires of the towers and on the curves of the Gothic arches which look like joined hands, the still, kind stars of heaven watch over the hours of sleep as over another office of the holy dwelling, and mark the span of silence between the dying and the dawning day.

Silence—the silence of the green, of the chapter, of the divine office, the silence of the cloisters—a quiet word, a sheltering word, already displayed on the frontal of the entrance-gate, a

² The wicket in the door of the cells is hardly ever made use of for this purpose.

brother word to that brief *Pax*, at once so simple and consoling—*silentium et pax*, like a pair of airy wings, spread their brotherly love and consolation over the sleeping monastery. What powerful allure in these friendly words! They enter the soul of the guest who comes in at the gate, and impress their friendly and wholesome truth on weary and wounded hearts which, under their influence regain self-mastery and the assurance of defense against a hardened world. The silence of the night, still more peaceful and deeper than that of the hours of the office, is a safe retreat in which the earthly charm of solitude may be fully experienced. This silence frees our inner strength and gives scope to the expression of our own possibilities, which to a poor soul that struggles are far more real and important than the precepts of human laws.

The silence of Compline, buoyant in the azure of the *Salve Regina*, and filled with the heavy fragrance of so many mystic flowers offered of an evening in the chapels, what resembles it more closely than the ecstasy of two hearts, joined in a single sigh of love?

All is purified, all is sanctified in the silence of the night. The being transcends its limitations and does not distinguish its own from the

universal essence. This communing, alone, can appease it and to the Christian soul the great All is a single unity, the divine person, whose embrace draws, absorbs, and utterly annihilates him.

In the early days of monasticism, silence hovered sovereign, motionless, and trembling, the blind conscience of eternity, in whose august shadow the ascetic rested among the lauras built by the great hermit, St. Anthony, in old Egypt; or on the border of the sacred river, at Arsinoë and on Pispah, the mountain chosen by the saint, and, later, higher up towards the delta, near the ruins of ancient Thebes and in the thebaidan golden desert, as also over the calm monasteries of St. Pachomius.

This is what the least lay brother experiences so long as his senses have not been completely enveloped in sleep. His imagination quickly carries him back to the most remote times and suddenly his heart begins to tremble in the divine presence. Time and space, all that chokes the human spirit in its grip, die away and become effaced and forgotten. The silence of God reveals, as in dream-flashes, the eternal brightness of the mystical world promised to the righteous. No doubt, in the silence which safeguards the

monks' sleep, are kingly treasures of sacred beauty, grandeur, and austerity, but what are these compared with the embrace of peace, the divine luxury of complete abandon to it, which lifts the soul on the waves of the eternal, far above the firmament, beyond the trembling ocean of the stars?

One evening, when I had closed myself within my cell, still under the spell of the shadows of Compline, it occurred to me that far from giving a refuge to sorrow, silence often tends to cultivate the tender shoots of happiness. For, are not they worthy of divine joys who by a quiet sign, with outstretched hands or crossed arms, with closed eyes and lips, call on this our delicate brother whose gestures are hidden? What holy beauty, that of the Rule, whose tenderness transforms discipline into a sublime law of love, and for whom the beauty of silence has always been a holy domain! Never has it appeared in any form save that of guardian angel protecting its divine religion. What unholy finger within the sleeping enclosure would dare to disturb the fragile folds of its robe from Compline until Prime? And who would not immediately owe satisfaction for such an act? In this con-

nection, an edifying anecdote from the life of St. Austroberte, Abbess of Pavilly, suggests itself to my mind.

One day, when the sustained effort of the prolonged chant of Matins had taxed the endurance of the community, the sisters were sent back to bed by their superior. The abbess, however, decided to see whether all were taking their rest. In the sparse light of dawn she walked slowly across the dormitory, holding her breath and stopping before each bed, when suddenly the sister guardian, who had awakened, with eyes still half closed and without further investigation as to the identity of the disturber, called out to her, "Sister, what are you doing; why disturb those who rest!" And, imposing the prescribed penance, she continued, "Go to the foot of the crucifix!" And the saintly abbess hastened to comply with her command.

What beautiful wreath might not be plaited of these anecdotes, which are like live cloister-flowers. They would dispel many vain phantoms of the imagination and would show that the most severe asceticism holds a wealth of tender sweetness when those who live by it practice it in divine simplicity of heart.

XIV

A MONK'S DEATH. THE CEMETERY

AN event before which our frailty, ever prone to weakness, cannot bow without a tremor of rebellion, is the death of one near to us, especially if he is still young. Such a death evokes in our hearts an old, undying aversion, akin to the feeling of uneasiness aroused by the mysteries that surround us. The evil shoots that germinate in the hidden places of our souls, which our reason believes itself to have choked, spring at such times with a suddenness that is revealing and humiliating.

Quite different, however, are the thoughts of those who have consecrated their lives to the perfecting of their souls. If they nourish Christian thoughts, such individuals react differently, and however modestly they may have advanced in the monastic habit and professed renunciation of the world, they find a reason for joy in the very circumstances in which people of the world see but a reason for mourning.

As for myself, at the time of my first visit to the Benedictine monastery of Mardesous, I

learned that shortly before my arrival a young monk had died, whose memory was particularly dear to the hearts of the brothers. The account I heard of his last moments and the vision I retained of the place where he rests moved my heart with so strange a feeling that the ordinary impression of sadness made by death was softened, and it assumed a far less severe, an almost welcoming aspect.

We are familiar with the letter written by Pascal to his older sister, Mme. P  rier, and to her husband, at the death of Pascal's father. "It is not proper that we should be without sorrow like the angels, who have none of the feelings of nature, nor is it proper that we should be without consolation like the pagans, who have no sense of grace." And M. Singlin wrote a few hours after the death of Jacqueline Pascal: "As for her, we should rejoice in it, and as for myself, I must not let it sadden me."

M. Singlin's soul was less tormented than was Pascal's. He hardly knew the anxieties which weigh on the ordinary soul. He was of simple heart, his faith was unshakable, and his words were always full of common sense. It is not remarkable, therefore, that in the face of the supreme event it should be he who pronounces

the words of true detachment, while the words of Pascal, based on the same conception of the hereafter, remain more sensibly human.

M. Singlin thus helps us to understand the attitude of the monks at this supreme moment, whose austerity, while it turns their speculations towards heavenly visions, seems to clarify their souls and lighten their hearts. But this is not enough. To their sense of detachment is added an actual sensation of joy.

When one among them enters into agony the community hastens to the cell of the dying. Nothing is too beautiful, nothing too sweet, for the brother who is about to depart from the tribulations of the world. His infirmity makes him into the image of Christ suffering. The pains which rack him are blessed, because they give him part in the sorrowful passion of Jesus. From now on, he is cherished with a new zeal, because to love him more tenderly in these moments is to adore in him the Master with a more living adoration. May he now be wrapped in tranquil joy, as in divine swaddling-clothes, and may the moments of farewell be eased for him who is about to know the wonders of eternity!

These are periods lived through with the greatest intensity of feeling in the cloister.

They must not be mourned as moments of death, but rejoiced in as an enchanted time when the divine essence of the creature dissolves into its first, invisible source, a time of reunion, of homeward flight, of supernatural birth, and of complete liberation.

To achieve this longed-for spiritual birth, however, the soul must pass through delicate transitions. In memory of Jesus, who said, "I was sick, and you visited me," the white monastic family draws close around the cell in which the light of a new dawn flickers. In memory of the Master, who declared that "whatever you have done to one of the least of mine, you have done it to me," it lavishes the tender care of a mother on the departing, for a sick person is always as a child, and in Christian eyes the dying one is as one newly born, who cannot be loved enough.

Is not the departing soul the messenger one sends to the mysterious realms of heaven, committing it with ardent prayers, since soon our finite eyes shall seek for it in vain? Moreover, since it is here for no more than a few, uncertain moments, it must be cared for lovingly. Can anything be too good for it, can any splendor prepare it sufficiently for the magnificence of the kingdom so close at hand? At least, the spirit

it has striven to breathe throughout the years in the cloister, may be made more ardent and more soothing; the cantilena, chanted with fervor each day, may lift its clear accents and the old psalms cover it with the flowers of its familiar chanting. At this moment the soul should be wholly composed, and for this reason it is well that those things which it loved most should join their caresses and bestow them simultaneously and generously, immersing and enrapturing the soul as in a dew of glowing freshness.

Around the deathbed the monks mumble psalms, while the cell radiates a festive air as though invisible wings were brooding over it. He who is about to depart must be sanctified with every grace. Before his eyes close in death, while there is still time, each one whispers in his ear the deep-felt wish of his heart. It is a last token of love, and it is the last visible expression of charity, that he may carry with him this sheaf of good wishes.

The great communion now needs only to be completed. The brotherly voices continue their devout chant, while the soul lifted on it and henceforth freed from every fetter, silently departs along the road of eternal promises. The

monks' faith is summed up, and the spirit of the cloister incorporated during these impassioned moments. For this brief space of time, imperfect human nature effaces itself before the holy Rule, which contains not only wise warnings against the vanity of the world, but also points out the path that is worth any suffering, in whose name one should love all suffering, since at the end of tribulations it leads to the very threshold of the one and only kingdom.

These moments, therefore, know no useless labor, no vain resignation, because they shine before the mystical heaven of the soul like the star of the Magi of old, and because having long been anticipated as a consolation, they now become the soul's crowning glory. Every thought of death is lost in this rapturous vision of immortal life.

The same conception breathes in the atmosphere of the modest cemetery a few hours later, when the mortal remnant of the brother is laid to rest. And again it became real to me when, in the failing light of evening, I saw the narrow walk, bordered by boxwood, in its setting of silence and peace, in which invisible presences seemed to stir—serenity, security, and love. There, in the angelic evening air, lay the narrow

graves, almost bare, and decorated only with a cross of simple wood, each covered with a little soil, just enough for a few live flowers to rise slowly toward heaven, little paradise-flowers, in truth, singing too of life without end. What eye would find a single sign of mourning among these tender little gardens, where the bodies, parted from their souls, all seem to blossom again? What sorrowful thought would one venture to read in their bright sweetness?

What peaceful lesson do not these elysian fields of the monasteries teach us, these calm retreats bathed in cool shadows, and what hope, what balm do they not promise for the wretchedness which torments us! In their spiritual light our hearts know a new serenity and a new love.

This dear funeral-scene—unforgettable to a guest who with a curiosity always devout has glimpsed the life of a monastery, and made familiar to those who have voluntarily committed their souls to its sanctuary, what a store of hope it provides for a mind that meditates and, still more, for a heart that is capable of feeling.

This cemetery is present in the consciousness every hour of the day, ever resting in a calm which nothing can disturb, a constant reminder

of the lofty conception of Christian death, sweetly scented with a mystic fragrance, more bewildering even than the breath of the flowers.

A monk who is subject to earthly distraction will find the cure here. Let his eyes wander to it in the early morning from his cell above, let the moments of recreation bring it back to his vision, let him see the first shadows of evening, before the hour for supper, wrap it in coolness and silence, and he will discern without difficulty, just as one perceives music, beneath its visible form the everlasting soul that breathes the breath of strength. How, then, could a faithful monk detach himself without sin from such contemplation? Is it possible to forget the dream which he has chosen, the ideal which has been revealed to him, the cherished features which melt so tenderly into his adoring gaze? Since he knows no light except through them, without them he would cease to be.

Sweet virtue of patience, noble joy of the expectation of eternity, stirring work of love—all are here. I left the humble enclosure feeling that its presence would light in the inhabitants of this place a singularly transparent flame, and that they would draw ever renewed energy from the daily sight of it. One must experience for

a few moments the ecstasy inspired by such a cemetery to know the falsity of death, the certitude of life, and the kingliness of peace.

Happy monks who may sense every hour of their lives the breath of heaven hovering over the flower-covered graves! It is then that the hours of time shall die. This is the haven which awaits them. But this haven does not open up to the tempest, it can be entered only in serenity, in the perfect joy which the saint of Assisi taught to brother Leo, in the joy in which all the saints of the Church commune, the real saints, who are so called because after a hard voyage they have brought with them to their final haven a spirit of hope and peace. The bodies are already sanctified through repose here. Of all the Benedictine hours, that of the cemetery is the most blessed—blessed, one might say, by a last office of Compline, imperceptibly vanished in the perfect union of love.

On leaving these tender enclosures behind, one finds it natural that certain privileged souls should be able to contemplate without terror the cruel event whose very name inspires fear. Since the day I saw them, I believe that, whether illusory or true, the words of M. Singlin were words of wisdom and virtue.

XV

THE BENEDICTINE SPIRIT

NOW that we have gone through the whole cycle of the Hours, is it not fitting that we should view them all together, and that while breathing the spiritual fragrance of each we should make an effort to comprehend their unity, their eternal meaning, their soul?

We read in the life of St. Benedict which Gregory the Great has left us that, "forsaking his father's house and wealth, with a mind only to serve God and live a holy life—he departed instructed with learned ignorance and furnished with unlearned wisdom."¹

Search for God, which is the first sign of a religious vocation, and ignorance of the things of the world, which must not be confused with an absolute ignorance of all things, but which is the holy innocence in which the mystics never cease to see one of the conditions for pure divine knowledge—these were the dispositions of the soul manifested from the beginning by the founder of the order.

¹ *Dialog.*, II., Prol.

If we stop short at this statement, however, we shall hardly grasp the true character of the Benedictine spirit. Similar dispositions, indeed, are found at the root of every vocation. They are part of the very essence of religious life, whose threefold object Dom Guéranger has described as conversion or penance for sins committed, imitation of Jesus Christ, and union with God by detachment from earthly bonds and by charity.² Father Olier, the founder of Saint-Sulpice, saw the mission of the Benedictines as the constant maintenance and renewal of the religious spirit in the Church.³ He may not be contradicted, but to define thus the spirit of the order is to stay within the domain of generalities.

It seems necessary, then, to recall the principles according to which the great orders have organized their own systems, and to remark with Dom Jean de Hemptinne⁴ that these orders have revealed their individuality as soon as the question has arisen as to what relation should be established between contemplation and active

² Cf. *Notions sur la Vie Religieuse et Monastique*, by the Rev. Dom Prosper Guéranger, Solesmes, 1885.

³ Quoted by Dom Bruno Destrée in his book, *Les Bénédictins*, Louvain, p. 15.

⁴ Cf. Dom Jean Hemptinne, *Notice sur l'Ordre de Saint Benoît*, Mardesous, 1924, pp. 2-3, 9-10.

life.⁵ Three monastic orders correspond to the three fundamental modes in which this relation may be conceived—the order of St. Benedict established in the sixth century, that of St. Francis, or the mendicant order, in the thirteenth, and, finally, the Society of Jesus, established by Ignatius Loyola in the sixteenth century.

Moreover, we must not forget that the Rule of St. Benedict, together with those of St. Basil, St. Augustine, and St. Francis of Assisi, constitute the whole doctrinal system which governs the regular clergy, and that the many orders of whose existence we are aware to-day represent only modifications of the theory and practice of one of these four great Rules. Thus the Cistercians, Olivetans, Black Friars, and Camaldulensians are all counted among the disciples of St. Benedict.

Against a superficial objection which is all too frequently raised, we have proof in the fact that the monastic conception, far from having been confined exclusively to a certain historical epoch, indicates by the very variety of its forms, a variety in the minds and viewpoints of those

⁵ See St. Gregory the Great on definition, relations and adjustments of active and contemplative work in Dom Butler, *Benedictine Monasticism*.

who at one time or another have launched their ideals upon the world. The monastic life is less a temporary ebullition of the period than eternal testimony to the worship of the divine.

I would not undertake to describe the Benedictine spirit without recalling the exact words in which Monsignor Pie has characterized it in a speech which has since become famous. "In St. Benedict's design," he asserts, "the monk is nothing else than the perfect Christian who, having consecrated himself to fulfill the evangelical counsels, undertakes to become steadfast in the practice of a life, which is essentially the life of a family, and which has for object the service of God and the correction of morals. The efficacious means of the correction of morals consists in the threefold renunciation of external goods, of even legitimate appetites of the flesh, and of the free use of the will, which gives rise to the trilogy of poverty, chastity, and obedience, as forming the common basis of the religious state."⁶ . . . A monk, as the name indicates, is one who isolates himself, *monachus*. If he goes so far as to isolate himself absolutely in order to live only with God, then his life is that of a hermit, an anchorite, or, perhaps, even a

⁶ Cf. *Reg.*, c. lviii.

stylite. If on the contrary, in withdrawing himself from the world and in seeking solitude, he gives himself over and vows himself to a family of brothers in whose company he engages in divine service and in mortification and labor, be it bodily or mental, under the guidance of an abbot who is at the same time to him a master and a father, under these conditions which constitute the cenobitic life he becomes a monk of St. Benedict and enters as a member of the very strong race for which alone, *ad coenobitarum fortissimum genus*,⁷ this Rule has been written. To sanctify oneself personally in the exercise of this life of perfection, and in that way, without preconception to be utilized in such and such a ministry, to become apt in all things good and useful, from the day on which obedience calls him to it in the service of the Church and of souls, that is a Benedictine in the whole simplicity, but also in the whole width and extent, of his vocation.”⁸

These lines aptly define the conditions and the objects of the Benedictine life.

Certainly the fervent quest of God attracts the soul to the conventual discipline. There is

⁷ *Reg.*, c. i.

⁸ Cf. *Oraison funèbre du T. R. P. Dom Prosper Guéranger, Abbé de Solesmes*, Paris, 1875.

no true liberty which is not systematically organized, and bonds, which to unaccustomed eyes may seem to constitute a tyrannical yoke, reveal themselves to the understanding mind as the necessary condition for spiritual emancipation. It is necessary strongly to emphasize the fact that no one can understand the true value and significance of the monastic vows who does not see them in the light of this reflection, and any thoughtful and intelligent conception of renunciation leads us naturally to this point of view.

In addition, we find in the Gospels⁹ the injunction and in the person of Christ the example of that renunciation which the disciple of St. Benedict must practice as the chief rule of his life. He who wishes to advance on the road to perfection cannot truly increase in God except in the measure in which he detaches himself from the world. And so it is that a soul distinguished by a true vocation, goes by instinct rather than by effort towards this renunciation, this mystical death, on which so many religious have discoursed, and which St. Theresa describes in such fervent terms. I hardly know a more moving moment than that when the novice, who

⁹ Matt. viii, 19-22; xix, 16-21; Luke ix, 57-61.

is about to pronounce the formula of the vows, prostrates himself on the cold flagstones of the choir, while a mortuary cloth, with funeral candles standing at its corners, covers him like a shroud, and the strokes of a symbolic passing-bell fall at long intervals.

To die from the world! What mystic expression of supreme humility! (commented upon with such triviality by the author of the *Following of Christ*). The sight and sound of this ceremony can be feared only by him who cannot see in it the irresistible impulse toward a spiritual paradise. No matter how poignant may be the moment of emotion of which I speak, there is nothing that can compare with the superhuman relief of the heart that is assured of the truth which it accepts and receives completely into itself. An abandonment of gilded miseries, a poverty overflowing with spiritual riches, a virginity growing up like a lily towards heaven, the disappearance of false pride and sorry vanities in the peace of obedience—no crown is adorned with more precious gems than the Christian crown of renunciation.

No one who rests upon the bosom of this *House of God*, the monastery, where according to the holy Patriarch's precept no one must be

troubled or even sad, would there compare his crown to that of martyrdom.¹⁰ Is it just to say that this renunciation destroys the spirit of liberty in the soul of the monk? Certainly, if by the spirit of liberty is meant the spirit of fantasy and whim, and not of that spiritual liberty which is only strengthened there. Moreover, in lesser things, the abbot is always free to relieve the brothers from fasting, from an hour of silence, and even from an office, should he deem it necessary to their welfare or their work. Dom Reylandt speaks but the strictest truth when he writes: "In a host of circumstances—we find in St. Benedict the constant tendency to let charity predominate over rigidity in the regulations in force."¹¹

In the course of these hours we have seen the three vows, through which the monk's renunciation finds expression, dominating the thought and activity of St. Benedict's sons. Let us recall the terms in which they are formulated and which tradition has handed down to us. *Pro-mitto coram Deo et sancti eius stabilitatem et conversionem morum et obedientiam secundum Regulam sancti Patris Benedicti*—"In the

¹⁰ *Reg.*, c. xxxi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, c. xxxi.

presence of God and of His saints, I promise stability and obedience according to the Rule of the holy Father Benedict.”¹²

Stability—this word characterizes the essential basis of the Benedictine life. Monsignor Ullathorne affirms this forcefully, when he says that “St. Benedict’s great reform is expressed by the single word, stability.”¹³ Although the definition of its exact meaning has given rise to very diverse commentaries, it is doubtless intended to mean absolute stability, a stability which, according to the very words of the Patriarch, exacts adherence “even unto death,” and includes even physical stability which demands that the monk shall remain for his entire life in the bosom of the monastery of his profession.

Into this vow comes also poverty—the passion of the little brother of Assisi—which is worth to us a treasure in heaven and is the first step on the path that follows Christ. It is necessary, however, to distinguish between various conceptions because the idea of it given us by the

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 88.

¹³ Monastic vows were hardly customary before the time of St. Benedict. Among others the monks of St. Basil pronounced such formulæ. The first text of a solemn promise, however, dates from St. Benedict’s days. Nevertheless, the monks considered it a sacred obligation to live as if they had pronounced these vows.

founder of the mendicant orders differs somewhat from that of previous centuries.

St. Francis made poverty the whole of monastic life. This virtue appeared to his vision as the essential instrument of sanctification, and he wanted it to govern not only his brothers individually, but also the general administration of the convents themselves. Let us hasten to add that this is a specific conception of poverty and although it finally came to prevail in most religious orders, it departs noticeably from the original conception of poverty as interpreted before the sixteenth century, particularly in the Benedictine order.¹⁴ Without doubt, we read in the Rule: "Let no one have the temerity to give or to receive anything without the permission of the abbot, nor to have anything whatsoever as his own, absolutely nothing, not a book, nor tablets, nor a style, in a word, nothing at all, because it is not permitted to them to have in their power either their body or their will."¹⁵ In the following paragraph we notice these memorable words from the Acts of the Apostles:

¹⁴ Cf. *L'Idéal Monastique et la Vie Chrétienne des premiers jours*, pp. 124-128.

¹⁵ *Reg.*, c. xxxiii. In c. lv of the Rule, St. Benedict stigmatizes individual ownership in these terms: "In order that the vice of ownership may be cut to the root."

"Let all things be common to all, as it is written."¹⁶ There is no doubt about the meaning. St. Benedict forbade any of his monks to possess anything as his own, but he did not wish that the monastery should be despoiled.¹⁷ In conformity with the practice of the first Christian communities, he ordered that all goods be put to common use. It is just this practice which explains the injunction against the individual possession of property pronounced by the holy Patriarch, for it is possible for every one to "obtain from the Father of the monastery all that is needful unto him."¹⁸ Thus the Benedictine poverty took on the character of a social virtue.

¹⁶ Acts iv.

¹⁷ In his *Benedictine Monasticism*, Dom Butler defends the monasteries' right to possess property and even riches, and adds that one's judgment in the matter should depend on two questions, viz., have the monks made good use of their wealth for the welfare of the society, and has the wealth contributed to change the simplicity of their monastic life?

¹⁸ *Reg.*, *ibid.*—The author of the *Idéal Monastique* indicates and develops this point of view very successfully. He writes: "The community of goods is truly what makes of the whole religious association one body, what assures it of a place in the sun and its social position, and the ecclesiastical authority never allows the canonical erection of a monastery which its members have not justified by their means of existence. One might say, that this is a very petty consideration. It may be so, but that belongs to the very nature of man, even in the Church . . . spiritual welfare is hardly possible without a good condition of the temporal, except in miraculous instances," p. 125. In the c. lv of the Rule, St. Benedict defined explicitly what was necessary for a monk, viz., "one cowl, one tunic, shoes, socks, one cincture, one knife, one style, one needle, one kerchief, and tablets."

Then comes holy chastity, united with poverty. A monk who does not even own his body—should he have the power to lead it along a road other than that of absolute purity? His attachment to Christ and the rôle of heavenly bride which is given his soul should more than suffice to turn him away definitely from the fickle affections of the world. What weight do carnal pleasures have in the estimation of one whose eyes see in the full light of heaven? In its flight towards the eternal kingdom, the monk's mind forsakes more completely each day the desires for which suffering humanity struggles. He realizes the complete union with God in a lesser degree than the nun, however, whose femininity seems to predestine her to become the spouse of Christ in the most absolute sense. Nevertheless, the infinite subtlety of his relations with Him—the recitation of the office, the prayer in the cell, and conferences each hour—helps him to triumph over every rebellious thought, and to perfect that spiritual union which he so passionately covets. Cleansed from every impurity, sanctified in his whole being, and carried away and transfused in God, he already lives the life of the angels. He feels more keenly the reality of his devotion to the Blessed Virgin,

whose love seems to reveal itself most fully to the heart of virgins. A eucharistic light floods his soul and glows in his eyes, causing him to experience at once the pride of victory and the joy of humility, and the more fully he understands the grace of chastity, the more holy and desirable does he find it and the more closely and lovingly clings to it. Everything proves to him that through holy purity toils and tasks become lighter. Threefold holy, chastity purifies his emotions, his reflections and his love.

Finally we come to holy obedience, the third step on the path to Christ, which in a way is a summary of the first two, and which Dom Guéranger defines in the following terms: "It consists in the renunciation of one's own will in order to do that of a superior, which one has freely imposed on oneself for the purpose of rendering oneself pleasing to God."¹⁹ As Jesus said to the Apostles, "he who hears you, hears me,"²⁰ so the Lord persuades the disciples of St. Benedict that to obey the abbot is to do the work of a child of God by giving proof of one's zeal and love to him who holds the place of the Father. This implies, according to the very

¹⁹ Dom Guéranger, *op. cit.*, c. x, No. 3.

²⁰ Luke x.

words of the Patriarch, "to promise to follow the Rule in all things and to observe all the commandments which are imposed on you,"²¹ without delay, as if the command came from God.²²

To realize its full force and value, the obedience must not remain merely external. It must be given fully, and in a cheerful spirit. "If the monk murmurs, not only with his lips, but even only in his heart, although he performs the command which he has received, his act will not be pleasing to God, who sees the murmuring in his heart."²³

By every mark of spirituality, its exceeding humility, its love, and its renunciation—one recognizes in the virtue of obedience the most sure sign of a monk's conversion and vocation. Doubtless, to begin with, certain disturbances and clashes are unavoidable in the development

²¹ *Reg. c. lviii.*

²² It must be noted, moreover, that the following words are added in the formula of the Benedictine vow of obedience, viz., "according to the Rule of St. Benedict." This restriction, which has been discussed by certain commentators, is of considerable importance, and Dom Augustin Datier has written in regard to it that "the authority of the superiors is not unlimited, but subject to certain conditions, because it should be *iuxta Regulam*, and neither beside nor over the Rule, and their orders should be *ad aedificationem* and not *ad destructionem*." A superior, then, could not beforehand constrain a monk to an obligation foreign to the conditions of cenobitic life.—Cf. Dom Butler, *op. cit.*

²³ *Reg., c. v.*

of such a virtue. When, however, the first period of struggle is over, how great is the consolation that it gives, spreading through the heart a peace in which we glimpse the beginnings of divine serenity. Moreover through all the difficulties that must be overcome along the road traveled by this virtue of virtues, the soul is helped by the ever faithful Friend, and Jesus of the meek countenance appears to the anxious heart, drawing it irresistibly to his bosom. His lips move, uttering again the words from Gethsemane—"Not my will be done, but Thine." He tells us that to renounce self is to free the heart from its last attachment to the world, and He assures us that to practice holy obedience is to fling oneself upon the tranquil waters of the river which flows into the heavenly port, and into a serenity and joy everlasting. There is wisdom in obedience, and it opens the narrow gate which leads to life and truth. To obey is to render to the Christ one loves a measure of what Christ has done for love of us, and it seems fitting that the cloister should be called the House of God since within it this virtue, most difficult of attainment, is fostered every hour of the day and night.

In order that they may progress and develop,

these evangelical virtues must be sustained by a whole series of practices, among which, as we have seen, prayer and labor are the most important. On these foundations—poverty, chastity, and obedience—the Benedictine life securely maintains its evangelical power.

Might not other practices than those of prayer and labor be of greater service in the pursuit of the inner life? It seems not, although they must be practiced with discretion and wisely adjusted to the individual soul, and although their limits must be fixed if the spiritual efflorescence is to realize its best possibilities, it is from the perfection of this method that the Benedictine spirit has drawn its sap and breath for the last fourteen centuries.

The question has long been discussed, and is still unsettled, as to whether the preference should be given liturgical prayer or labor. Some of the most famous monks of the order have held that liturgical occupations should be given first place in the conventual life. Others, on the contrary, exerted their efforts to prevent the rôle of monastic labor from being subordinated to that of liturgy.

Gregory the Great, St. Benedict of Aniana,

Odo of Cluny,²⁴ and nearer to ourselves, Dom Guéranger, who made it the object of his reform, have assigned a considerable rôle to the divine office. In their eyes the splendor of the ceremonies, the magnificence of the buildings and of the ornaments, the perfect rendition of the melodies, the hymns and the antiphons, surpassed in importance the work of labor.

Let us not forget, however, that opposite preferences continue constantly to be voiced. Benedictine history bears witness to this. The development of many famous schools, such as Corbie, Metz, Fulda, Saint-Gall, and Reichenau, took place in the eleventh century, in the very epoch when St. Benedict of Aniana lengthened the divine office.²⁵ On the other hand, we must remember the reform of Cîteaux, through which the monks returned to the spirit of the original Rule, and restored labor to its rightful place by going so far as to give it the character of penance.²⁶

Indeed, the holy Patriarch recommends zeal

²⁴ Cf. Dom Usmer Berlière, *op. cit.*, pp. 42, 115-116, and 165, where the author recalls how liturgical prayer was really the soul of Cluny.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 115-116.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 236-237. Dom Usmer Berlière writes in the *Rev. Bénédictine* of May, 1924, "A monk is not really a churchman until he consecrates a serious work to the service of the church."

for the work of God with the most explicit insistence. He even commands that "one prefer nothing to the work of God."²⁷ If, however, he places it first among monastic occupations, he nevertheless does not subordinate labor to it completely or see in it the only system of conventual life. The Rule defines with precision what time is to be devoted to the divine office, and consecrates the rest of the time to reading and to labor.²⁸ In a general way, the balance between prayer and labor is more accurately struck in our days, thus testifying, it would seem, to a spirit in greater conformity with the essence of the Rule.

However this may be, are not prayer and labor expressions of one and the same spirit? Does not a monk pursue the supreme end of sanctification along both roads? From this viewpoint it is easy to understand that labor is hardly less than a form of prayer. Its contemplative aspect is apparent from the moment when it begins to be nourished by the spirit of truth, which must ceaselessly control it. Surely in the two—labor and prayer—the three evangelical virtues find an incomparable mode of expression,

²⁷ *Reg.*, c. xliii.

²⁸ Cf. *L'Idéal Monastique*, pp. 96-98.

by which their growth may at any time be measured. Similarly the three vows of profession find their nurture herein unceasingly renewed. They are the two hearths where the threefold oath which the monk bears in his heart is warmed and nourished, and where daily the family spirit recruits its strength and becomes more firmly established—this spirit which with its solicitude for unity and independence alike is so dear to St. Benedict's posterity.²⁹

Peace, solitude, silence, simplicity, and joy, these impose their rule within the precincts of the cloister and in the soul that has taken refuge there in order to taste in anticipation of the sweet brightness of the eternal abode. This soul has not crushed that essence within itself that makes humanity nobler and more beautiful. It has simply enhanced it by destroying forever the weaknesses that menace it and that most of

²⁹ It is necessary to distinguish the special character of the Benedictine family. This family is not like the Franciscan, which consists of the whole body of monks who follow the Rule of the Poverello; rather it consists of the community in each individual monastery, so that there are as many Benedictine families as there are completely organized Benedictine monasteries.—Cf. Dom Butler, *op. cit.*—The following precious lines of Cardinal Gasquet, quoted in the same work, should be remembered, viz., "The vow of stability is the key to the monastic life, as it is interpreted by the Rule of St. Benedict; according to him the monastery is established as one family to which the monk binds himself forever. . . ." (Sketch XII.)

us who are of the world must struggle against as temptations which betray only those who lack character and honesty. And although it acknowledges the unique beauty of the spirit, it does not deny external beauty its place, for it has no wish to abolish that manifestation of human power, which it often pleases God to employ as an instrument in His service. Therefore we must regard the Benedictine cloisters as hearths of complete beauty, because with spiritual beauty they associate that of the external forms of life.

To a Benedictine soul art is dignified as a heavenly gift, and when it is a question of glorifying God, no beauty must be deemed too great. *De bonis suis in nobis parendum est*, we should serve God with the bounty with which He has provided us. It is true that Cîteaux pursued mortification to the extent of reducing buildings and practiced the cult with extreme simplicity; it is true that St. Bernard in his abstinence could not be ironical enough regarding everything that did not conform rigorously with the most austere conception. However, we find Peter the Venerable at Cluny and Suger at Saint-Denis testifying in favor of a veritable "luxury for God." From their faith in the immense power of art

these great monks drew the enlightened idea of its social mission, and not without ingratitude can we be unmindful of the services rendered by art to the faith of future ages. How many misguided souls have not been brought back to God by the sight of past splendors and by meditation upon pictured symbols which the artist monks have bequeathed to posterity? Those who cannot rise to the summit of pure spiritual idealism are in need of the stimulus of a tangible beauty, which will serve for them as a starting-point in their reflections. Moreover, I am not at all sure that even those minds that have reached the supreme height of spiritual faith remain indifferent before the sight of plastic art. We may say, for the benefit of those skeptics whom the breath of faith will never touch, and also for those whom the vision of pure beauty does not leave insensible, that the Benedictine spirit manifests itself as truly complete, since it bears within its bosom the invisible essence of divinity and crystallizes it outwardly in a tangible form. It is a complete and perfect beauty, whose every element has been enriched with eager life and speaks with the eloquence of faith and truth.

This beauty, while yet it exalts itself, does not cease to be a humble beauty. It remains

always a symbol of the beauty of the spirit. Every window-pane, every ornament, therefore, bears within itself an element of eternity. A witness of ages long since past, each object nevertheless retains a simplicity, a youth, a joy, which are destined never to die. Indeed, this joy and this youth are part of a tradition as ancient as religion itself, and the Benedictine spirit, the home of all beauty, could not fail to gather them in. It was a duty to love joy, the sister of peace and of a humble heart, because joy is a sister also of love, and to make progress in joy is to make progress in love.

Love—after all I have said, I should like this word to remain in the memory of those who have read my narrative as the symbol of the spirit of the Benedictine monks. When after my first visit I saw the towers of the convent vanish in the distance, this was the word I carried with me in my heart, so thoroughly impregnated with the fragrance of the place I was leaving that for a long time I dared not pronounce it, because in the world it seemed to me utterly diminished, abased, and denatured. This love which no disturbance can alter and which flowers in the untrammelled purity of the cloister, is the essence of what the soul of the religious searches for and

finds. At its first breath, it is as though the whole being with all its profound forces freed itself spontaneously from its mortal cares, and was borne away to a more stable world, secure in the realization that the spirit of charity dwells within. Not without a sense of rebellion can one reflect upon the blasphemies heaped by the ignorance of the world upon the monastic life or of the still more distressing hostility displayed by so many devout people who lack understanding and have endeavored to stigmatize the spiritual state of the monks by the charges of indifference and egotism. I can find no better retort than the following stirring lines which are written by a Benedictine monk:

“Why is it said that the souls of religious are ignorant of the delicacy of love, of great tenderness, of the passion to love? Why is a monk often looked upon as a cold individual who is austere even in his love? Why are the dwellers in the solitude accused of cowardly fleeing the company of their likes, as if their egotism were sufficient to fill the narrowness of their heart? Why all this on the part of people who, quite ignorant of your beauties, love but one only company, and whom one single heart can captivate?

Are they unknown, then, the fires which can consume the heart of a monk?

“As an analogy, can it be said that the bird which, in order to live needs the freedom of nature and the vastness of the sky, lives less than the prisoner in a cage? And the flowers which grow in the solitude, with such sweetness of aroma and such richness in color, are they to be thought less delicate and beautiful because they die in the hands of man?

“The soul of the true monk is the bird, which claims the open, pure and blue sky. Like a swallow it soars towards it in its unwearying flight, it delights in the altitudes from which the world is lost to sight, it gambols and does not leave these privileged spheres, unless to yield to the infirmities of nature. To this soul, this blue sky is God Himself, and it rises and dwells therein through prayer. If it leaves the earth, it is because it finds the earth too small; it is fleeing because it is devoured by love. The fact is, that no one of its observers understands sufficiently its insatiable need to love, and, above all, that no one can fill or satiate its heart. It flees, then, in quest of God, it flees because compelled by love.

“Again, the soul of the monk is the delicate

flower, which wilts and dries up from contact with the world.

“Take away from a loving heart the object of its love, and you will see it close up, pine away, and soon perish from the experience. A true monk’s heart is passionately in love, not with any creature but with God. If one, therefore, would take away from him his All, and substitute utter nothingness how, then, could he live? Moreover, if he should come to die from it, would one still say that it was because he could not love?”³⁰

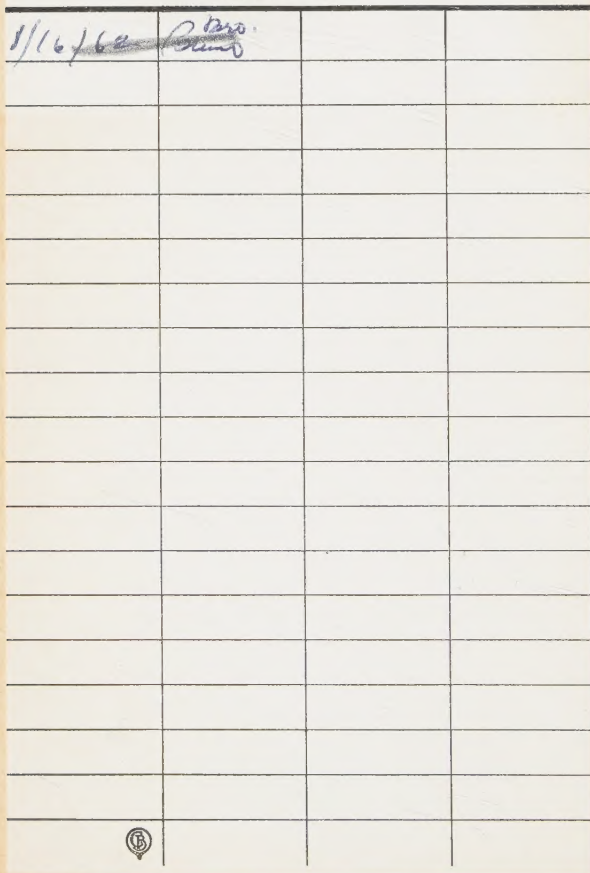
It is to these heights, where the world loses sight of it, that the Benedictine spirit takes its flight. Because it escapes the gaze of those who remain below, however, its beauty is none the less visible to those capable of lifting their eyes toward it with understanding sympathy and veneration. Marked with the ancient seal of the centuries, this spirit has been in existence over a long stretch of time. We should love it from its earliest manifestations. The very length of its life is the proof of its vitality. To the thinking mind antiquity is not archaism, and it is

³⁰ Cf. *Une Âme Bénédictine*, Dom Pie de Hemptinne, 1912, pp. 182-183. This page is taken from the thoughts which a young monk of the abbey of Mardesous, who died in 1907, used to put down in his private note-book.

necessary only to acquaint oneself with the life of contemporary monasteries to know that their intellectual activity is at least as ardent as it was in the early days.

The brightness of prayer, the white purity of sacred texts, the splendor of the conventual liturgy, the rare crown of renunciation, of labor, of beauty and of love—the unbroken cantilena of the Benedictine Hours! I know souls transported by their ecstasy. They have heard as it were the echo of the chimes of eternity, they have felt the dizziness of a fluttering of wings! Let us be stronger than these too tender souls! If we divine whence come these chimes, let us also strengthen ourselves to hear their summons. Let us yield with all our souls to the voice of these blessed Hours, but only that we may hear forever the chant of hope and draw in the breath of the divine power!

THE END

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